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# EDITORIAL: TAKING A STAND

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

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Occasionally, we hear from people who think that this magazine you are holding ought to "take a stand" on some issue that one would naturally suppose to be of interest to it.

Why not take a stand, for instance, on the space program? Since it is to be supposed that an SF magazine would support space exploration, why not favor having this nation proceed with full vigor on such a program? We should urge that more money be appropriated for it, suggest that our readers write their congressmen, and so on and so on.

Well, this magazine can't and won't. It isn't that kind of a magazine. We're not an organ of news and opinion. We're a magazine whose purpose it is to bring you stories and related material of interest to science fiction readers.

All this material—stories, science essays, reviews, letters, and so on—are designed to amuse and interest and not to persuade.

In fact, if it turns out that, without really meaning to, anything we do seems to take a stand and become argumentative, then there is the strong temptation to have someone with a different viewpoint use the pages of our magazine to air that and thus restore our neutrality. This was so in the case of the argument Niven and I had a few issues back.

To be sure, George buys some stories and rejects others, and this would seem to be expressing an opinion; but that opinion deals only with the quality of the stories, as George sees it, and not on their point of view. There might well be stories or other items with whose point of view George, or Shawna, or even I, might disagree quite vehemently; but we can't keep them out for that reason only, if, in our judgement, they are good stories that would interest a major segment of our readers.

In fact, if any story had a pronounced point of view, it would be very likely to displease either George or me in that respect, for George and I disagree considerably on many aspects of the political,



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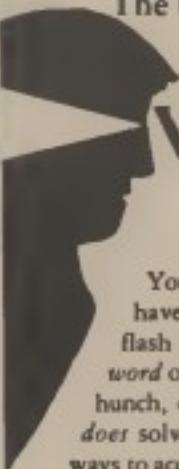
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economic, and social affairs of the nation and the world. We are both aware of this, but it does not impede our friendship or our ability to work together. In fact, it is convenient, for if we saw too nearly eye to eye, there might be more of a temptation to slant the magazine our way.

But wait, there is one portion of the magazine that *does* represent opinion, and sometimes pretty forcefully, too; and that is the editorial—this essay you are at this moment reading. What is the editorial for?

Editorial comment is quite common in magazines; but in the early science fiction magazines, it was often represented by merely a few paragraphs dealing with the stories in the issue and (naturally) praising them and trying to rouse interest in them. The idea was that some casual reader, picking up the magazine and leafing through it, would encounter the editorial at the very beginning and be so attracted by the wonderful contents (as described by the editor) that he would pay out his money in a frenzy of desire and dash home to start reading those stories.

As was true of so many things science-fictional, this was changed by John W. Campbell. At some point, he seems to have decided that his magazine, *Astounding/Analog*, required no puffery; and he settled down to turning out long editorials expressing his opinion on matters social and scientific. John had pronounced and idiosyncratic views, and he laid them on the line without hesitation and never worried about upsetting people. For instance, he *always* upset me. I never got past three paragraphs without turning purple.

Nevertheless, it set a precedent that continued in *Analog* after John's death, though I must say that the views of, first, Ben Bova and then, Stan Schmidt were a lot easier for me to take.

When this magazine started, I also followed John's precedent, but introduced my own modification. I made up my mind to express my views on matters closely related to science fiction and to range outward no farther than that.

But, as it happens, even though I stick to science fiction, I still manage to offend people. One person wrote to tell me that he would end his subscription because he was so annoyed by the views I expressed in "The Mosaic and the Plate Glass," which appeared in the October 1980 issue. That editorial was a discussion of two varieties of style in fiction, and you wouldn't have thought (or at least *I* wouldn't have thought) it could rouse passion—but it did.

Nevertheless, I will continue to express my views as forcefully as I can in these editorials even at the risk of offending people, though

288 PAGES

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I naturally hope that no one will be offended beyond the point of sending me a haughty or contemptuous letter. My views, please remember, are not necessarily the views of the magazine (which has no views except for its insistence on quality and editorial guidelines) or even the views of George and Shawna, let alone Joel.

For instance, the editorial I have mentioned, in which I clearly stated my personal preference for one particular variety of style, appeared in the same issue with a long story that was clearly of another variety of style. This was pointed out, either with annoyance or with amusement, by a sizable number of people.

This was not done on purpose, though a few readers thought it was. George does not necessarily run my editorials in the order in which I turn them in, since some editorials deal with subjects that require insertion at the earliest possible time. Nor can we know too far in advance in which issue a particular story will appear. A particular story must fit into place with some of the accuracy of a jigsaw piece and must lend an air of pleasing variety when taken in conjunction with other stories in the issue, and this means that a particular story may be hurried along or held back.

So the conjunction of editorial and story was coincidental.

As it happens, I have one problem which Campbell, Bova, and Schmidt did not have. Those three wrote primarily for their magazines; and if they managed to avoid offending too many readers in their editorials, they were home safe. Not so I. In addition to my editorials in this magazine, I write essays all over the lot and appear endlessly in books, magazines, and newspapers, expressing myself on every conceivable subject, and always with no mistake possible as to what my views may be.

It follows, then, that a reader can take offense at something I have never said in the magazine and then find that the easiest way of striking back is at the magazine. Thus, a reader recently announced that she was cancelling her subscription to the magazine because Isaac Asimov is a humanist and she would absolutely refuse to contribute money to a humanist. She went on to describe humanism in horrendous terms.

Well, I am indeed a humanist. At least I signed the first and the second Humanist Manifesto and received some publicity as a result; and I suppose that makes me a humanist, if anything does.

But then what is a humanist? I'm not sure that a hard-and-fast definition can be advanced, though I hope a humanist isn't what my subscription-cancelling friend said it was. In fact, I don't know that all humanists agree on what a humanist is (any more than all Chris-

tians agree on what a Christian is).

From my standpoint, a humanist is someone who does not accept a divine or beyond-the-natural cause or explanation for any phenomenon in the Universe, but seeks instead for an explanation rooted in the laws of nature as worked out by human reason. A humanist considers human beings to be important in their own right. He looks no further for the motivation or the rationale of his beliefs and behavior than his acceptance of the prime importance of the human being and of the ecology and biosphere of which he or she is part.

But being a humanist isn't the worst thing about me. I am a rationalist and a stubborn liberal despite the fact that everyone tells me the country is swinging over to conservatism and that liberalism is discredited. I favor world-government; I'm an environmentalist; I'm a feminist; I'm against all forms of racism; I worry about the poor and dispossessed. In short, I'm what hard-headed practical men

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would call a fuzzy-minded do-gooder. Yet just to show that people are complicated, I also favor some goals with which liberalism is not usually connected, since I'm for space, nuclear power, computers, and more and more technology.

All this can be offensive and cost us subscriptions, but I can't help that. I am bound to take my stand, if not in this magazine then elsewhere, and I can't very well mute my feelings and make bland my opinions for fear of offending someone.

If I offend too many to the point of cancelling subscriptions or refusing to buy the magazine, then clearly we're going to fail.

All I can do about that is to hope that those among you who are either pleased with my views or who are at least willing to let me hold them and express them as long as they do not affect the quality of the magazine, make sure they renew their subscriptions or continue to buy individual issues, and perhaps persuade others to subscribe or buy as well.

PS. I will be heading a seminar at The Institute on Man and Science, Rensselaerville NY 12147, August 16-20 inclusive. The subject will be "Control of Space Resources." If interested, write to the Institute.

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## ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

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- The Many-Colored Land* by Julian May, Houghton Mifflin, \$12.95.  
*Sunfall* by C.J. Cherryh, DAW Books, \$2.25 (paper).  
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*Asimov on Science Fiction* by Isaac Asimov, Doubleday, \$14.95.

Oh, boy, faithful readers, do I have a book for you!

But first (he says in his best cliffhanger fashion), I'd like to raise a question—a pertinent one, believe me—which I have touched on in this space before.

Am I right in often withholding information on a book on the theory that the reader will derive more pleasure in *not* knowing such things in advance? I think only reviewers of mysteries seem to be concerned with that aspect of the critic's code, because they know that if they reveal that the butler did it in a review, they'll be lynched by vengeful readers. But some of the best experiences of my life have come from films I've seen or books I've read absolutely cold, with no prior knowledge at all. And while I believe that a plot summary is usually necessary to a review so that the reader will have some idea as to what it's about, there are times when that can spoil some wonderful surprises.

I bring all this up because the current find is such an extraordinary achievement, and manages to do something so unprecedented that I am quite literally awestruck. But to reveal the major portion of the book's impact would be to lessen the fun of finding out just what is being done. *Because* what is done is so interesting, I could go on about it for pages. But because I had such a good time discovering what the author was up to, I simply don't want to say too much, and I hope that it is clear that I'm not being coy.

With that out of the way, let me get to the point. The book is *The Many-Colored Land*, by Julian May. If that name rings the vaguest of bells, it would probably indicate you've been reading SF for some

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time. So far as I can determine, she has, in the genre, published only a bare few stories, back in the '50s, one of them being the particularly well-received "Dune Roller," in *Astounding*.

*The Many-Colored Land* is the first of a trilogy, a fact that would make me blanch at this point, but I'm so enthusiastic about it that I can only be happy that there's more to come. And what I can reveal is the opening frame of the work. After a prologue that will leave you fairly bewildered (which includes a use of the word *galaxy* which I took to be mistaken in the way that so many dumb movies use it—in the sense of another star system; I was very wrong), we are presented with a future of something over a century hence, and a very interesting one it is, too. It is Utopic in a Clarkesque way (*Clarke* is one of those names that doesn't adjetivize well [*adjective* is one of those words that verbizes badly]). Mankind has, after some struggle, joined forces with other intelligent races, opening up hundreds of worlds for expansion; one is given the impression of a rich universe with endless intellectual and physical potential; it rings that much truer because the intervening years between now and then are filled in subtly but with the reverberations of reality.

"No Utopia can ever give satisfaction to everyone," says Clarke in *Childhood's End*, and that is true of May's future. She introduces us to a varied bunch of malcontents, from a nun to an amoral starship captain, placing them skillfully in the contexts of this future. There is one total escape from this Utopia, and that is called Exile. It seems that a very limited form of time travel has been stumbled upon. One can travel from only one point, a location in France, and only backward. Anything that travels forward from the past degenerates totally, but various clues lead the researchers to believe that the "trip" ends in the Pliocene. And a surprising number of people have elected to make that journey. We follow the group that we've already been introduced to.

So it seems that this excellently constructed future is simply a framework, which has molded the major characters of the book. At this point I was anticipating something like *The Hardy Boys Camping in the Pliocene*, and rather regretted leaving the interesting period the author had created.

No fear. And this is where I must invoke the critic's code. Not for the world would I reveal what is found back there, and no way in the world will you be able to guess. I'm really being self-sacrificing, you know. What the author does is so rich that I would very much like to talk about it; perhaps I'll have that chance after the book has become the instant classic I'm sure it will.

I can say that the book is a crackling adventure, told in a plain, no-nonsense style that brings back the best of classic SF. At only one point does the author slip, I think; about 300 pages in there is a chapter where she attempts some rather broad humor, typically science-fictional in that it is based on the use of contemporary clichés presented in the context of another time. It succeeds in being only cute, and I thought that the book might be lost, but luckily, that is the only place of that sort.

One thing that must be said, even at the risk of giving something away, is that fantasy lovers should not allow themselves to be offput by the solid SF opening; I raised an eyebrow when the jacket copy made the comparison to Tolkien—"aha," thought I, "another typical bit of publisher's hype." Wrong. And at other times, Merritt, Ibsen, and Lewis Carroll were brought to mind.

In conclusion, any year which already has in it *The Many-Colored Land* and *The Claw of the Conciliator*, on about which I was carrying in the last issue, has to go down as an annum for the annals of SF. And what a range between the two; *Claw*, with its ultrasophisticated writing and extraordinary concepts, and *Land*, the very best kind of literate action/adventure story, which reading took me back to the excitement of my first issue of *Planet Stories*. We may well be in another Golden Age.

I feel guilty about C.J. Cherryh's work because I never quite like it as much as I feel I ought to. The prolific lady's writing is skilled and her ideas always intelligent, but in what I've read of her novels there is always some sort of spark of excitement missing. I seem to be in the minority, I might note, since Cherryh is certainly one of the most popular and best-selling authors in the field today.

Her latest, *Sunfall*, is something a bit different for her. It is really six different stories, given a bit of a linking framework in a short prologue and minimally in interior matters in the stories themselves. The framework is the Earth of a far-distant future, when most of humanity has spread to the stars. The old cities of the planet remain, however, and each of the stories revolves around one of them.

"The Only Death in the City" (Paris) tells of a culture where reincarnation is, literally, a way of life, and what befalls a "new soul" born there. "The Haunted Tower" (London) concerns the ghosts that still haunt the Tower of London and "Ice" (Moscow) is about a hunter, and a sort of lupine Moby Dick, a white wolf that may or may not be real.

"Nightgame" (Rome) concerns the expectedly decadent pleasures of the Eternal City even then; "Highliner" (New York) has to do with the workers who traverse the upper reaches of the giant single building New York has become (not recommended to readers with vertigo); "The General" (Peking), with yet another attempt on the Forbidden City by invaders from the Steppes.

As you can see, the stories are more atmospheric fantasy than science fiction, and I'm not sure the attempt to link them works with such disparate material; the whole does not really transcend the parts. But the parts *are* interesting, to a greater or lesser degree, and looking at it as simply a collection of short stories, I think Cherryh's readers will not be disappointed.

I like to keep an eye on children's book publications, since you can never tell when another *Hobbit* or *Riddle-Master* might appear. Robert Siegel's *Alpha Centauri* isn't in that league, but it's a charming fantasy (not SF, despite the title), none the less. Becky is an American girl visiting England for the first time (the author captures the wonder of an initial visit there for a fantasy aficionado quite well), and is kidnapped by her horse into the past, when men shared the land (still attached to the continent at that point) with centaurs and other mythological creatures.

Becky is involved in the centaurs' defense against the greedy humans, and eventually leads them to the gate to Alpha Centauri, which is sort of the centaurs' heaven.

There's a strong resemblance to the Narnia books, since this is obviously a disguised theological fable, but the message doesn't overload the story too much; *Alpha Centauri* will please lovers of gentler fantasies.

Another area I check out periodically is that one at the other end of the fantasy spectrum from SF, i.e. the occult. Two recent novels from that direction are mildly amusing. I hope Brian Lumley hasn't abandoned his cosmological thrillers à la Lovecraft, but just took a vacation to write *Khai of Ancient Khem*. It's a romp involving reincarnation, or more accurately, a sort of time transference, between predynastic Egypt and now. It sports one of the more amusing covers of the year, having to do with a television screen and a gent in a Tutankhamen headdress.

*The Next* by Bob Randall is an oddity. Packaged to look like yet another *Exorcist* rerun, it's about a boy of ten, staying with his young aunt, who suddenly matures into a man and begins an affair with

her. It could be the silly idea of the century, but it somehow comes off. The story is told alternately by the aunt and her sister, the boy's mother, who both sound like escapees from *All About Eve*, and it comes to a surprising and surprisingly poignant ending.

I welcome new editions of old classics because it gives me a chance to give at least a brief notice for those who may not have found them. I can't imagine there's anyone who doesn't know Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End*, but I know some young folk who have never seen *Citizen Kane* because they've been put off by its cult status as a masterpiece, and that could well be the case with this novel. It's been rereleased in trade (oversized) paperback, and I was happy for the opportunity of reading it again.

It certainly holds up. The middle section is one of the best-drawn, positive futures I've ever come across (which, of course, inspired the quote about Utopia I used above), and the final cosmic tragedy is about as close as anyone will get to those of Olaf Stapledon. I'd forgotten the sorrow of those last pages, and also how it presages, in another key, *2001*. If you haven't read it in a while, I'd say it's worth going back to. If you've never read it, remedy the situation immediately.

And another reprint worthy of note is M. John Harrison's *The Pastel City*, Volume 1 of the Viriconium sequence. (The second volume is the recent *A Storm of Wings*, which I admired in this space some months back.) *The Pastel City*, first published in 1971, is probably the first example of that Baroque SF that is so wonderfully omnipresent these days. Viriconium is the Pastel City, last of the Afternoon Cultures of a far, far future Earth. It's a time of grotesques and madness, and has something of the quality of a sword-and-sorcery novel as written by Mervyn Peake. Harrison is not the easiest or most translucent of writers, but *The Pastel City* and its sequel more than repay any effort involved.

Finally, as usual, the announcement of publications by those connected with this periodical. This time there are *Isaac Asimov Presents the Best Science Fiction of the 19th Century* edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh, and Martin H. Greenberg, and *Asimov on Science Fiction* by Isaac Asimov.

# WHAT MAD DIVERSION

by Ted Reynolds

art: Steve Biasi, Freelancenter





*It has nothing at all to do with this story, but Mr. Reynolds advises us that there was recently a bill in the California State Senate that authorizes taxpayers to deduct from their taxes an amount equal to 55% of the acquisition cost of a Solar System.*

Something hung across the screen like a gash in space, bleeding into the stars.

Ace threshed about, trying to move Helene's weight off so he could see better. With single-minded motive she pressed him back against the sand.

"Get your damned tits out of the way," he snapped in futile irritation. Then his groping finger found the proper switch and he flicked it off. With a fading sigh, the succubus faded from view, leaving his vision of the console screen unobstructed.

The thing was still there, as dismal and uneasing as his first glance had suggested. The more he stared at it, the less he liked the very idea of it.

"Ace, dearest, don't you want to . . ."

Helene's continuing auditory and tactile presence was too distracting. He reached out and shut her away completely. She hadn't been that good anyway.

The huge thing on the screen sprawled and bled. It lay gently curved across the darkness, its arc biting away into the infinitely packed star dust beyond it. Lit from left and below by some dim yellow-green light source, the first impression was of a vast banana lost among the stars. But the longer Ace looked the more detail, unsutting a mere banana, emerged about the image.

There were serrated ribs, elongations paralleling the curved core. Something resembling dorsal fins, in various stages of extension. Clustered tendrils, like the frayed ends of a torn cable, fastened to the blunted end.

And a long, jagged rip a full third of the way along the side of the object, from which something, oozing, obscured the closer stars.

Ace reached up and pulled down his sniffer, eyes still fixed on the console. Placing the end of the tube in his nostril, he inhaled deeply. Then he lay back in the sand, breathing in calm, and considered possibilities.

A ship of some kind, evidently; not conceivably a human one. Wrecked somehow, dead or dying. Leave it well alone.

He let the sniffer retract and lay back on the beach, looking up into the dark blue sky as he considered bringing Helene back. But not just yet; a glance at his monitor reminded him that he was still captain this month. He'd better perform the minimum. Eventually, the others would hear about this, and he didn't need any more aggravation from them. He'd have to do *something* official, for the record.

Rising heavily to his feet, Ace moved to the console and squatted on his heels before it, a paunchy, balding, sullen man. A red flush was moving onto his face like the warning flag that tells that the bridge is out. With awkward taps he began fishing into the long-unused information retrieval systems. The monitor presented him a couple of completely impossible scenarios, which he discarded, and then one that was all too plausible. The image was being relayed from the leading probe, five light years in advance of the *MariJane*; that damned thing was almost directly in the flight path. Five light years would take 18 ship days, but at their velocity, 99 percent of that would have been eaten up already while the image crawled back toward them. They'd pass that thing in about four hours.

Bending forward, Ace squinted at the drifting object. The point of view was slowly shifting as the long-range scan of the passing probe swung to keep the wreck centered. The tendrils were outlined more clearly across the obtuse end now, webs against the illuminated surface. They were weaving visibly back and forth, like seaweed in a sluggish current. But this was empty vacuum. That ship wasn't quite dead, thought Ace. Not quite.

He asked the dimensions of the object, and got an answer of 916 meters.

"Ten times our length," mused Ace. He paused a moment, no heavy mathematician. "A thousand times our volume. Room for six thousand nasty little aliens our size."

It couldn't be a growth of some kind then, he guessed. Nothing could grow that big.

They'd pass within a few thousand A. U. of the thing if they didn't maneuver away. Which would mean losing the use of their leading probe permanently. Plus loss time in arrival at Earth; a week, a month maybe.

But I don't want to go anywhere near that monster, he thought.

He sat back heavily on the sand. Why did it have to be during his trick as Captain? Whatever he did, he'd catch crap from one of the others. Maybe he should just ignore it. Helene . . . ? He was a bit exhausted by the Rubenesque. Perhaps the Botticelli Venus . . . but

he'd have to spend time programming that. Damn!

Almost desperately he punched up Helene. She appeared, as always, in the doorway, smiling at him, swaying towards him on heavy hips, arms bent back to undo her breast cups. Her skirt fell in waves to the floor as she neared him, her sultry voice whispering, "Ace, darling, I've been so lonely. . . ." her breasts bobbing like melons on the sea of her flesh. . . .

With a curse, he flipped her off and out and grabbed for his pants.

"What a bore!" he muttered angrily. "Well, I'm sure not going to take it all on myself. It's about time those idiots stopped sulking in their holes anyway."

He grinned bitterly. No one could blame him for dragging them out, could they? He had a legitimate reason.

On the way out of the room, he flicked off the lights, beach, palms, and sky. The covered glow of the console remained, outlining dimly the bare metal walls of the cabin, the rumpled cot, the rows of switches. On the monitor screen, the gutted thing swam in emptiness.

Ace floated disgustedly through the jungle, looking for Hilda, who was lying low.

The whole null-g area of the ship, outside of the six crew cabins, was kept on jungle for Hilda's sake. There had been too much conflict and irritation about how to set it at the beginning of the voyage, and by now nobody cared. No one left their own rooms any more; particularly not to visit any of the rest of the crew. Mutual detestation and disesteem were pretty high on the *MariJane*. The last time, to Ace's knowledge, that anyone had left their own quarters was when Truscott had gone to Burkeen's room last year and killed her. Everyone had had to come out then; there'd been an inquest, and a reprogramming of Captain's watches. Truscott had been confined to quarters for the duration of the flight, but everyone had stayed confined since. They were just totally fed up with one another.

Ace was seething by the time he reached the main control banks. Even if it wasn't real, a hanging branch could give a nasty slap across the face. He pulled himself to a stop at the main console face, and turned to face the clotted vegetation.

"Last chance, Hilda. Come out now, or you're really going to get a faceful."

No response. He reached behind him and flipped off the jungle.

The control room, the openings to the after storage and service rooms, lay before him in dull utilitarian metal. Ten feet from him a small hairy form crouched motionless behind a large calceolaria

which was no longer there. Ace grinned mirthlessly.

"I see you, Hilda. Come here!"

The synchimp peeked out at him from under her covering arm, and then rose from her crouch, resigned to doom.

"I said come here!"

The simp reluctantly pushed herself forward. Eyeing her pancake face, her dangling arms, Ace wondered briefly if Hilda might not prove an acceptable successor to Helene. At least Hilda was real enough. And he imagined she'd gotten pretty horny since her Herman died. Well, she could just count herself lucky she was alive. It had been a tossup which simp would test the atmosphere of Justwich 3, and Herman had been chosen only because Hilda was marginally the better housekeeper.

Then it had turned out they'd have to wear suits their whole time on Justwich.

Hilda bobbed up to Ace and looked at him coyly.

"Clean?" she said tentatively, waving a hand at the spotless control room. "Clean? Good Hilda?" with the questioning rise which concluded most of her primitive sentences.

"It better be," said Ace, and then, leaning down from his hold on the console, he captured her thin wrist with a quick grab. "But I told you to come!"

He drew his hand back and slapped the simp twice across the face hard, then flung her away from him. She cowered in midair, rubbing her cheek ruefully.

"Hurt," she muttered. "Hilda hurt." There was no question in her tone this time, Ace was pleased to note.

"You better believe it. And you don't come next time you're called, you're going to hurt a lot more. Who's awake?"

Hilda pushed off the deck and drifted to the control board, where she hesitantly scanned the lighting arrays, while Ace stared off into the rounded corners of the control room.

"Brak wake. Jolu wake. Assen sleep. Burri . . . ?" Hilda stopped in confusion.

"Dumb simp," Ace said tolerantly. "Try to get your tongue around the words. How many times have I told you that you'll never be human till you learn to talk like one. Listen carefully. *Braque* is awake. *Jolayemi* is awake. *Oxender* is asleep. And *Burkeen* is . . . yes, Hilda?"

"Burki not sleep, not wake?" said the simp, shuffling her feet a meter above the deck.

"Right, Hilda. Say it, now. Burkeen is . . . "

The little ape drew herself together and abruptly screamed shrilly, "Dead. Dead. Burki's dead." Then she rolled into a ball and awaited chastisement.

"Yeah," Ace breathed. "Burki's dead." He reached out a foot, and poked the quivering hair of the simp. "What about Truscott?"

"Not dead?" the ape said, not looking up.

"God, I suppose not. I should be so lucky. You idiot, is Truscott awake or asleep?"

"Not know. No light?"

Ace swung to look at the console array. "You know, Hilda, you're right. He must have jimmixed the sensors somehow. Well, on his head be it. If he gets sick, no one will know. Or care," he added. "Get Braque out here."

"Par-don?"

"I said, call Braque. I want to see her."

Hilda did her best at a freefall bow, fingers under footsoles, and then looked around for a hold. Ace made no move to help as she spun futilely in space, searching ludicrously for some tree limb or vine to start from. Finally with a grunt of disgust Ace stretched out his foot and hooked her in. As soon as she touched the control bank she swiveled, planted her soles against it, straightened, and was off down the control room, caroming off the walls towards the entrance to B-Quarters, 35 meters away.

Ace crooked a knee under the console panel and waited weariedly. It was a tossup between Pronta Braque and Vernice Jolayemi, he supposed. He didn't want to see anybody. But out of all the people in the galaxy he most didn't want ever to see again, those were two of the four.

Hilda was having quite a little conversation at the B-Quarters speaker, inaudible from here. He figured Braque was playing games again. And yet when the trip started, he'd thought her a pretty level-headed individual. Now she was absolutely loony. Like the rest of them.

Like I'd be, he considered objectively, if I didn't have my succubi and my weed to keep me level. Remembering, he dug a hand into his pants pocket, crumbled a large handful of weed, and sniffed it appreciatively.

For the first years out, *Braque* had been his succubus, he recalled wryly. It seemed impossible to imagine now.

Hilda was ricochetting back now, in the cringing manner which implied less than total success in her mission. She brought herself to a full stop beside Ace, and hung there, gesticulating widely as

she tried to keep a complex message straight.

"Brak busy. Not Brak come. You go Brak? Not now. She say?"

"Not now, when?"

"Soon, she say?"

"Busy at what? She can't be *doing* anything. There's nothing to do."

Hilda's flat face squinted up in an effort of memory. Braque had obviously said a great deal, and much of it was already fading from Hilda's not overly superior lobes.

"Busy-ness. Inter-voo? She say. You put . . . on hold?"

"Screw that!" Ace spat on the console, and Hilda sprang to wipe off the nuisance at once. "Forget it. You go tell that turgid ice-maiden that I want to see her *now*. Tell her to check her monitor. I'm captain of this bucket at present. Now!"

Hilda was off again. Ace followed her less precipitously. As he reached the entry to B-Quarters, Hilda was leaning on the comm button and saying "But Ace say . . ."

Braque's voice broke in sharply. "Hilda, I said . . ."

Ace leaned close to the speaker. "Cut the crap, Pronta; this is important, and I mean *now*."

There was a pause. Then Pronta Braque's voice resumed, more than a little acidulous. "Hilda, you may bring in the gentleman's card." The door buzzed. Ace pushed it open and entered, leaving Hilda gazing about her in bewilderment for anything resembling a card.

Pronta Braque sat at a nobly stark agate desk. Behind her was a wide picture window framing a view of the Martian Cleft from half a mile high. Her desk was bare of all save visaphone, recorder, and anachronistic pen and notepad. She was her old self: crisp, utilitarian, and snotty.

"I have told you frequently enough, Mr. VanZant," she was already snipping as he crossed the thick shag towards her, "that I do not appreciate interruptions during conference. Say what you have to say rapidly, if you please, and get out."

"During conference!" Ace plumped down heavily in the chair before the desk, looking hard at her. "I sure hope you don't actually believe any of your poppycock. Who could you be conferring with in this neck of the galaxy?"

"Please hurry it up," snapped Braque. "My time is valuable."

Ace dug a small pile of weed from his pocket and took some pleasure in dumping it in front of him on the immaculate desk. "You can't be anticipating much of importance for the next few years,"

he began to point out, and then his eye was caught by movement at the edge of the picture window. He stared at the rim for a moment and then said, "Pronta, you're really incredible. This thing's actually rotating."

She took it for a compliment, turned and followed his gaze to where the frame of the window, centimeter by centimeter, was slowly chewing into the landscape. "That's right," she said. "In ninety minutes you get the full swing of the horizon. I wish I had more time to look at it." She looked back at him just a shade less viperously. "What did you say I could do for you?"

He looked back at her, considering carefully. Her eyes, opaque brown marbles he had once thought marvelously cute, looked at him steadily. Her drift towards age, Ace thought, was sharpening her cheekbones, graying her hair, extending her chin—slowly making her an image of that unerring and unemotional authority on everything she had pretended to be from the start.

"Pronta. Ms. Braque," he corrected. "Just what is your position here?"

She pressed something beneath her desk and a nameplate flashed into existence on top of it. *P. Braque, Enabler General, System Trade Complex.*

"Very impressive," he admitted. "But Ms. Braque, I hope it hasn't slipped your memory that you are *also* a crewman in ordinary on the *MariJane Crosschopper*, over five hundred light years from Earth and some years yet to get there?"

She laughed lightly, surprising him. "Of course not, Ace," she said quietly. "But there's not much I can do about that, is there? This is so much more interesting . . . and important," she added, tapping her desk with her pen. "It's not easy, being responsible for the total import-export of over 18 billion people. Particularly unaided." She paused a moment, and her pen now tapped her cheek. "I wonder, Mr. VanZant, if you'd consider taking a position as my personal secretary and expediter?"

Ace groaned. "Pronta, all I want is a few minutes with you back in reality. After that, you can get on with being grand marshal of the amalgamated fleets of the galaxy for all I care."

Braque drew herself up coolly. "You are being deliberately insulting, Ace, but I'll forgive you this time, for old times' sake and because you know not what you do. Of course what I do here is real and important, and you're a fool for not seeing it. But there's this difference between us: I know what *you* mean by reality. I am quite capable of handling whatever's worrying you about the operation

of the *MariJane* during her return from the Quantar Reach with a crew of six," she elaborated precisely, "and then returning to my vital duties here. You're so narrow, Ace!"

Ace muttered, "Your duties, and your office, and your whole solar system trade, would vanish if you twitch all those switches under your desk to off."

"Don't you think I know that?" snapped Braque. "I'm not crazy, you know. Though I'm beginning to wonder about you." She reached down and began flipping switches. Snap/carpets; snap/bookshelves; snap/paintings; snap/Mars; snap/ and the desk dwindled to a meter square metal cabinet. Ace's pile of weed fluttered to the bare deck. The two sat in a hard metal room under cold yellow lighting, in a starship fleeing through nothing at near the speed of light. And looked at each other.

"Now?" Braque asked in business mode, and then paused. "Do you mind?" She flicked a switch and the wide desk reappeared, almost cracking Ace's head as he stooped to retrieve his scattered sniff. Braque leaned forward, resting her elbows. "More comfortable, right? Now, what's your problem?"

Ace took a deep inhalation of weed. Was it worth this?

"We've got a potential course diversion coming up," he said dryly. "And though I would be within my rights as current Captain deciding on it myself, I thought for the sake of crew morale, and so certain people wouldn't jump down my throat afterwards, I'd take a referendum."

"A diversion?" Braque said slowly. "That's rather unexpected, isn't it? Hold it," she raised a hand. "Don't tell me just yet. Let me think it out."

She cupped her chin in her palms, contemplatively.

"If you're considering course correction, which means lag time in getting back to Earth and loss of our lead probe, it must be because you're either trying to get to something or trying to get away from something. If it were Oxender, I'd suppose you'd seen something you thought worth checking out. But not you. You turned out the most dismal pessimist I can imagine. That's not a sign of intelligent communication; it's some natural phenomenon. That's not going to turn out to be a protostar, just some ions rubbing together. We had hardly reached the Reach before you wanted to run home again."

"I was consistently right on all that, Pronta," Ace observed.

She ignored him, of course. "So I imagine there's some danger you want to avoid. Now, we're travelling at near light speed, which severely restricts the input we can get about conditions ahead of us.

And whatever it is, it can't be more than a few light years ahead."

"Why not?" Ace asked, genuinely perplexed.

"Because then you'd simply wait three days, and Oxender will be Captain, and you'd let him handle it. You just can't accept responsibility, Ace; your being here at all demonstrates that. Anyway, I surmise this problem was picked up by our leading probe, something that wasn't here on our way out . . . I'd guess a nova near our path, some five or six light years ahead. How's that, Ace?"

Ace breathed a sigh of relief. He would have hated for Braque to get it right on. "Naw. Way off."

Braque sagged a bit. "Well," she persisted, "it wasn't bad reasoning, was it? Come on, Ace, that was pretty good, admit it. Even if I missed something."

"It was awfully good, Pronta, except for being a crock of crap. There's something ahead of us, all right, but if it were a nova, we'd be dead. We're right on top of it."

Ace waited for her to ask, but she didn't, so at last he said:

"I think it's a ship. An alien ship."

There was a long pause. Braque's sharp features did not change. She carefully weighed the information. Then without a sign of either elation or distress, she said again, "Oh. That is rather interesting, you know. Is it . . . Do you mind?" She clicked something under her desk, and the window appeared again behind her, framing the Martian landscape. "I think better, somehow . . ."

"Yeah." Just for an instant, looking at Braque's inexpressive features, Ace had a strange flash; he had loved this woman, slept with her, wanted to protect her from the universe. . . . It vanished. This hard-edged virago wanted no protection; moreover, she was a pain in the butt. He rose and walked to the window, looked down. The Cleft was mostly passed out of sight. The sweep of open countryside looked awfully realistic, the little dome cities at the apexes of road systems, the canal networks, not native but human; no, human native. Of course, there never was any such structure as this they were on top of, but that was simple computer viewpoint. Ace wondered if Braque's Mars was built from careful documentation she'd brought when they left, or was an imaginary construct from her images and beliefs. He'd never been on Mars; as far as he could remember, neither had she.

Abruptly, he didn't care. Either way, it couldn't exist any more. Not for over a thousand years.

He turned back. "Turn on your screen, Braque. You'll see it."

She looked at him, and then flipped on her console screen. Until

further orders, the broadcast image from the probe was replaying itself again and again. This was an earlier point Ace hadn't seen. The probe was approaching, and the sprawling giant was seen edge on, a yellowish star abaft and above it.

"What the Hell is that?" asked Braque brightly.

"I think it's the wreck of an alien spaceship," Ace said sagely, from the height of twenty minutes experience of getting used to it. "I hope there aren't any survivors. . . . As we pass it you'll see it's pretty severely breached. . . ."

"That's no *ship*, you imbecile," said Braque. "It's got eyes!"

Ace looked at the screen again. And clutched for his weed. She was right, for once.

"Hilda," Braque told the simp as they emerged from B-Quarters. "I'm crossing over to F for a short while. Please hold any incoming calls, and be sure to get the names of any visitors."

"Are you sure Hilda can handle such delicate work?" Ace asked sarcastically as they pushed across the control room towards Vernice Jolayemi's quarters. "After all, she's only got an I. Q. of 40 or so."

"Don't be stupid, Ace," said Braque shortly. "What calls or visitors could there possibly be 500 light years out from Earth? It's just makework. Really, I think you're close to the deep end."

He snarled sullenly.

As they passed the main console, Braque veered aside to flip the jungle on again.

"That simp has you all trained," Ace complained. "I swear she's the most spoiled creature on this ship."

"Who brings you your meals?" Braque asked.

F-Quarters was around the aft bend of the hull, nearest to the propulsion baffles. Ace stopped Braque before they reached it.

"We'd better get our act together," he suggested. "All we need is a majority to be sure—three out of five. What's your position on what we should do?"

"You could have decided by yourself and made it stick," Braque observed coldly. "Now you've called for a referendum, and you're going to get it. We'll have to pool everybody's opinions and experience before we decide."

"You'd better be kidding. Jolayemi? Oxender? Truscott? You think any of them are sane enough to have a valid opinion?"

"I'm almost sure you're not, Ace. Well, we'll see."

She pushed the comm button, and said briskly, "Vernice? Pronta here, with Ace. We've got to see you for a few minutes, I'm afraid."

There was a long silence. Braque was about to say something more when Vernice's voice emerged, softly sad and musical, an echo from the past. "I think you should go away, Pronta. This is private property." A pause. Then, with a touch of desperation, "I do not receive visitors any more."

"Vernice, dear," said Braque, holding down the button. "I'm as sorry as you are, but it simply can't be helped. We *must* see you."

"Oh," came the reply, infinitely melancholy. And then, "Well, if it *must* be, then I suppose . . . But *that* man isn't with you, I hope to God."

"If you mean Truscott, he's locked in his quarters for the rest of the flight," Braque assured her.

"All right. I couldn't face *him*, I'm sure. I've never really forgiven him for what he did to poor Burkeen. Well, come in, then. . . ."

The door buzzed, and they pushed in.

Jolayemi's life style had crescendoed since anyone had last visited her, it seemed. Then she'd been content as the belle of a Dixie mansion. Now she had become quite extravagant.

All that remained of the earlier mansion was the porticoed porch where Vernice Jolayemi sat rocking, draped in satins and sipping ices. It was set on the brow of a slope which plunged down to form one wall of a natural amphitheatre. From there the land gently heaved off into the further distances where a sunset glow lingered on the horizon. Through the twilight below loomed the dim shapes of large beasts, African, Indian, and heraldic. A wide flight of marble steps switchbacked out of the valley up to the veranda, and up and down it passed masked grandees and mummers, paying their calls on the grand lady of the estate.

Vernice bowed slightly in her rocker as they approached. She raised her hand, and a servitor in domino detached himself from the background and offered them brandy ices.

"How sweet to see you again," Vernice lied politely. "Won't you be seated? Ah . . . perhaps not there. Over there."

Ace passed by the plush chair which wasn't really there—wasn't it just like Vernice to skimp on the merely practical aspects of her surroundings—and sat on the edge of a marble fountain. Water gaily splashed and gurgled a few inches from his buttocks. It was probably Vernice's cot. The programming was incomplete; it *felt* like her cot.

Braque remained standing, revolving the cool glass in her hand and gazing down at Vernice.

"What brings you all the way over here?" asked Vernice, arching her eyebrows in soft wonder. "It must have been just ages since we

were all together last."

"About one hundred thirteen years," agreed Braque.

Ace was still looking at Vernice Jolayemi in amazement. She didn't look a shade over seventeen, though she was thirty-three and two months. Her skin appeared freshly rosetinted in the dusklight; the sour look of dissatisfaction he had come to associate with her was gone. Then he realized how she did it and relaxed. Who did she think she was fooling? Hypocrite!

"Sorry to disturb you, dear," Braque was saying, "but we've got a ship's decision to make, and Ace here has called for a referendum."

Vernice's cool eyes swung toward Ace. She smiled almost tenderly. "Hello, Ace." She raised her glass slightly. "Old times, yes? I hope you're feeling better than when we last met."

"Much, thank you, Vernice." He raised his glass in turn. When he'd 'last met' Vernice, she'd sliced him in the neck with a stiletto . . . a holo, of course, but tactile as well as visual; the shock had hurt for hours. And told Ace that if he ever came into her quarters again, she'd personally dismantle his masculine apparatus. Perhaps she'd forgotten. Or it might have been Braque's presence, or her own assumed high persona. Still he kept his eyes on her cautiously.

"You are certainly a real belladonna," he assured her.

Vernice smiled graciously.

"It's a simple matter," Braque pressed. "You see, we have evidence of a rather ambiguous phenomenon near our flight path a few hours ahead, and we have to decide at once if we should divert our course . . ."

Vernice raised a hand peremptorily. "One little moment, please . . . Pronta, isn't it? You must remember that was all some time ago. I really have no idea what you're talking about." She paused, then added, "It has been so nice seeing you. I think it would be better now if you went somewhere else."

Oh, swell, thought Ace; here's another one.

A unicorn ascended the steps and sank to its knees beside Jolayemi. Her hand absently caressed its silky mane. Her ersatz servant was leaning over her shoulder, whispering in her ear. She laughed softly, reaching up and stroking his face. "Oh, Roscoe, you're sweet." She turned back to Braque. "My butler thinks I should listen, if only for a few minutes. Though I can't think what good it can do. I assure you, I've forgotten all of that ship affair completely."

"It would be better not to forget it totally," said Braque quietly. "We are still on the flight, you know, and shall be for well over four

years more . . . perhaps longer. That is one of the things we must decide."

Vernice was sitting tensely now, and Ace thought he could see tiny shivers actually running up her whole body. But she sipped delicately at her drink, in a play of considerate attention.

"Quickly, then," she said.

Braque leaned forward. "There is something strange close ahead of us, adrift in space. It is just possibly an alien vessel, but Ace and I both believe now it is an incredibly large alien creature. It appears to be alive, in total vacuum; it is extremely big and formidable looking. On the other hand, it also appears badly injured and may well be dead by now. Our present course will pass it at about 2300 A. U., at near light speed, which seems pretty safe. Still . . . it's an ominous-looking thing."

Vernice was still as a statue, her drink held tightly in one hand, her other hand lost in the unicorn's white mane, her eyes starkly unreadable. Braque looked at her, and resumed.

"Now we can change course to avoid that thing's area, although it means a certain amount of delay in our eventual arrival at Earth. And, of course, every minute we wait before correcting course means more delay for the same amount of avoidance. And changing course means losing our lead probe, so we'll be flying blind the rest of the way to Earth. But then, cases like this are what the lead probe is for. Another point . . ."

There was a sharply brittle snap as the glass in Vernice's hand broke and cascaded in shards to her lap. From the look of sudden pain in her eyes, Ace guessed it had been a real glass.

"Pronta!" Vernice said, her tone held on the very rim of agony, "let me make myself very clear. I do know, you see, that I am on the *MariJane*, on return trip to Sol. I just do not wish to think about it. There is much I do not wish to think about, and everything concerning that trip is included in that category. I am truly sorry you have problems, and I sincerely hope you will work them out to everybody's satisfaction; but you will really have to count me out. I'm quite incapable of helping you."

She turned to her butler and received another drink. She drew small patterns in the beaded drops along its lip.

"I know you are probably talking about real problems," she said at last. "But I cannot take them seriously. In fact, I assure you that if I once began to pay attention to what you want to tell me, with more than the tiniest part of my mind, I should go quite insane. Really." She looked at Braque, and then at Ace. "And so would you

just please, please, *please go away!*"

Braque rose to her feet, so abruptly a passing maharajah was forced to swerve to avoid her.

"Of course, Vernice. I gather you would just as soon not vote on our actions; you leave ship's decisions to the rest of us? Is that right?"

"Quite right, Pronta. You are very astute. Roscoe, show my guests out, there's a love."

"Don't bother," said Ace. "We can find the way, I'm sure. It can't be more than three meters."

As they felt their way to the door, Ace looked back. Vernice Jolayemi and her solicitous butler were close again, lip to ear, hand to cheek. Vernice was softly laughing. The never-fading sunset was cut off by the closing door; it locked with a snap.

"Lot of help from *her*," Ace told Braque. "As I think I suggested before we went there."

Braque shrugged. "She had to be asked. She might have felt strongly on the subject." She paused a moment before she added, "But if you ask me, she's a real mental mess at the moment."

Ace thought, well it takes one to know. . . . Naw, how would *he* know?

"What bothers me," said Braque, "is just what does she *do* when *she's Captain*?"

"That's her business."

"True. Well, who next?"

Ace pulled his hand out of his pocket and sniffed the faint aroma. "I still want to know where *you* stand on the question of this beast ahead," he hinted.

"Haven't got everybody's input yet."

They rounded the bend in the corridor to reach the main console banks again. Braque scanned the lights.

"Oxender's asleep. Truscott's blanked out his sensors," she observed.

"I knew that already."

"So let's take Truscott next. He might be up."

"You're so bloody thoughtful," Ace said. "Are you actually going to ask Truscott? He's out of his damned skull."

"He's in this too, Ace. Everyone's got a right to his opinion," Braque added.

"So did Burkeen."

"She's dead, Ace."

"I know, damn it. That's my point. Truscott killed her." They swung across the jungle that filled the control room, passing the

storage areas, toward A-Quarters in the bow. "Burkeen would have had an opinion too. I should think we could just let the opinion she would have had cancel out Truscott's. And leave him alone."

She looked at him with a touch of asperity. "Ace, that isn't at all logical. Her opinion might well have been the same as Truscott's." She paused, and added as if there were some reasonable connection, "Besides, if he killed her, well, you know she was asking for it."

Ace spit into the foliage. "Well, then it was the first thing she ever asked from him he gave her."

"Better late than never," summed up Braque, and they pulled up at the entrance to A-Quarters.

"Let me handle this," said Ace. "I'm still Captain."

"Oh, shut up," said Braque, and pressed the comm button.

The comm wasn't working; Truscott had managed to do that in too. Also, his door was unlocked. Also, he was not at home. Whether he'd been on the loose for hours or a year wasn't immediately apparent.

Truscott's quarters were dimly lit, and Ace had some difficulty figuring out what they were. They stood in a low-roofed rounded tunnel, ribbed with pale vertical struts from end to end. Moss hung from the walls and ceiling, brushing clammily across their faces as they moved. Things cracked and rustled under their feet. The whole effect was highly gloomy and claustrophobic.

"We're inside a whale," said Braque suddenly, and everything fell into place. Ace knelt on a flattened bench whittled into one of the ribs, and felt for the holo switches.

"I think it's rather amusing," said Braque.

Ace turned it off anyway. A-Quarters resumed its archetypal state.

"Well," suggested Braque. "I think we'd better find Hilda."

Hilda wasn't still waiting for visitors outside Braque's quarters, of course. She couldn't hold to an order for more than a few minutes; besides, she had other things to do. They drifted through the control jungle searching for her, and located her in one of the storage rooms forward, carrying out inventory.

"Hilda," asked Braque. "When did you last see Mr. Truscott?"

Hilda couldn't remember.

"Is he still drawing rations?"

They checked the readouts together. Somewhere in the ship, Truscott was still receiving his standard and requested supplies.

"It doesn't matter, I suppose," said Braque, but she seemed a little thoughtful. "Let's go see Oxender." She snagged the nearest vine

and launched herself toward E-Quarters, mid-port side. Ace glanced briefly at the nearby door to his own quarters. At least he didn't have to be jealous of what Helene was doing while he was gone. With a sigh, he followed the "Enabler General."

Push button. "Oxender?"

"Yeah. Speaking."

"We have to see you a minute."

"Come on in. Door's open."

Ace pushed open the door, and they entered. As Ace's feet hit the floor, he looked about him at the most unexpected layout yet.

Bright lighting shone off the metal walls of the cubicle. Blank console screen, bench, desk, and cot, supply slot, utility niche.

Zavan Oxender dropped the book in his hand to the cot beside him and stood up, stretching his six-foot-four length comfortably.

"Hello, folks. Glad you stopped by. Was getting dull. Might have looked you up one of these days." He crossed to the supply slot. "Mix you something?"

Ace stared at him in some awe. Was this the Oxender who had spent four planet falls stoned out of his mind, had declared formal war on the other five during the ninth year of the flight, and had, in the twelfth year, actually tried to reverse polarity on the main accumulators as an experiment "to see if the ship would exceed c-speeds or blow up"? (Cost them three months useless drifting, that was all.) *This Oxender?*

Braque wasn't fazed. "Hi, Zavan. A little question of course correction has come up, and we wanted your opinion about it."

"Anything, anything. Glad to help." Oxender turned from the supply slot. "Brandy, I think, Ace? One of those ghastly Bloody Marys for you, Pronta, as I remember. Me, I'll take tomato juice straight up. Now, what's moving?"

"Switch on your screen, won't you?" Braque asked him, taking her drink.

"Oh, that. Nasty looking brute, isn't it? Wonder why they put that in." Oxender reached out his long arm and turned on the screen. Once again the gutted monster swam among the bleak stars. It lay across the screen, a vast sprawl, tendrils weaving helplessly, great eye blinking slowly, spue of life-stuff from its ruined flank.

"Beneath the thunders of the upper deep . . ." said Oxender quietly, settling back and sipping his tomato juice.

"Huh?" Ace.

"Tennyson. An obvious Kraken. Out of its natural habitat? Anyway."

"Well, now." Braque was all executive briskness. "We're taking a referendum whether we should maintain course as planned."

"Or detour north to stay more clear of it," Ace added hopefully.

"Or actually stop and try to communicate with it," suggested Oxender.

"Oh, God!" said Ace, slopping his drink. And then, "You can't think that damned thing's *intelligent!*"

"No idea what to think," said Oxender meditatively. "Never saw anything like it before. Never even thought of imagining or dreaming to *pretend* to see anything like it before. Could be anything. Or nothing much." He took another sip. "You realize it will have been ten years of that thing's time, by the time we could pull up alongside it. May well be dead already."

Ace thought of the scale of the thing on the screen. "That's not going to bleed to death in a mere ten years."

"What do you think we should do, Zavan?" Braque pressed.

Oxender upended his glass. "Get the others together," he said. "Talk about it. Then do what seems the best. That's the thing." He got up and stretched again. "How's everybody doing, by the way?"

"Jolayemi doesn't want to talk about it," said Braque. "She's pretty spaced right now. Says we can act for her, whatever we decide. We can't locate Truscott yet."

"We'll find him," Oxender assured her. "He can't be farther than fifty meters. Burkeen?"

"Burkeen's dead," Braque reminded him.

Oxender's brow furrowed and he looked a bit perplexed. Then his long face cleared.

"Oh, that's right," he agreed. "I'd forgotten that. Funny. Oh, well . . ."

At the door he ushered them out politely, and then leaned back to flick a switch near the door. The floor of E-Quarters dissolved into a pool of lapping magma. The sheer heat radiating from the room drove Ace to retreat rapidly. He looked at Oxender.

"Just simple prudence," said Oxender casually. "Now where's Truscott? Burkeen's room?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Braque. "Though, no; on second thought, the monitors for that room are working, and no one's in there now."

"No harm looking," said Oxender.

The three threaded their way across the control room. Passing the main console, Ace turned off the jungle again.

The entrance to C-Quarters was locked.

"We can open it from the main console," suggested Oxender.

"Is there any need for that?" Ace asked in irritation. "We've got our quorum with three; four, actually, since Jolayemi will go along with whatever we decide."

"I'm curious," said Oxender simply, and Braque nodded agreement, so they headed back to the control banks. Hilda spun up to them there to watch what they were doing.

"Burri's room?" she asked worriedly. "Why Burri's room?"

Oxender ruffled her hair absently. "Routine checkup, apeface."

"No go in?" protested Hilda. "No Burri there? No no one there?"

Oxender pressed the release for C-Quarters, and they returned the thirty meters.

"No go in? No go in?" Hilda kept saying under her breath.

Braque looked at her. "I think Hilda's got a secret," she said in amusement.

Oxender pushed the door to C-Quarters open and palmed the lights. He gave a low whistle. "You better believe it; look at this."

The other two joined him at the door. On the far wall, meticulously outlined in spray paint, a large outline drawing caught the stark lighting.

"What the hell is it?" asked Ace.

Oxender grinned. "The offspring of Grendel and a supernova?"

"Don't be silly," said Braque. "It's a perfectly recognizable representation of a synchimp; a bit idealized, perhaps. Hilda must have taken ages to do it. I wonder if she thinks she looks like that."

"I don't think it's a self-portrait," said Oxender. "Look." He pointed to the deck of the cabin beneath the picture. A newly opened can of dried bananas rested quietly at the feet of the image.

Braque turned and called, "Come here, Hilda; at once. No, we're not angry."

"I am," said Ace. "Get her to clean it up. It's a mess."

Hilda bobbed up nervously beside them at the doorway. Oxender pointed to the oeuvre on the wall. "You made that, of course. What is it supposed to be? Your god or something? Are you getting religion?"

Hilda squirmed on the lances of three human stares. She opened her wide mouth several times before she could answer.

"Keep? Keep okay?"

"Hell, we don't give a damn what you worship," said Oxender. "But just what is it?"

Hilda hugged her knees to her chest, eyes darting from one to another of them. "That . . . Herman. Me keep?"

The three looked at one another. Ace spat. "Let's go."

They paused at the main console again. Braque automatically reached out and flipped on the jungle again.

"Hide and seek, yet," said Oxender. "Where can Truscott have gotten to?"

"I really should get back to my office," said Braque slowly. "I have some very important decisions to make this afternoon. Except . . ." she eyed the monitors carefully, "I just realized where he must be. I should have thought of it before. Come along." She pushed off and drifted across the control room, brushing aside vegetation as she went. The others shrugged and followed.

Braque pushed a comm button. "It's us again."

"Please, not again," came Vernice Jolayemi's voice. "I am really not recovered from your last visit yet."

"Let us in, Vernice," snapped Braque. "I'm in no mood for games."

"I hope this isn't going to become routine," complained Jolayemi as the door retracted. "You are driving me to absolute *distraction!*"

The three humans and one ape pushed into F-Quarters. The sun was still setting endlessly over distant hills. Jolayemi sat enthroned in her old place. Her butler began mixing drinks for the new arrivals.

"I do definitely remember telling you that I did not wish to be disturbed," said Jolayemi in a tone of asperity. "Oh, hello, Zavan."

"Nice to see you again, sweets," said Oxender. "I like your layout. Do you do all your own programming?"

"We would like to have a word with Truscott," said Braque. "Would you mind turning—" a fling of the hand included all Vernice's world "—it off for a moment?"

Jolayemi drew herself up stiffly, outraged. "Ms. Braque, I do protest, this is far too rude for words. Roscoe, show them the way out at once."

"Oh, Vernice, give them their few minutes," said her butler, reaching over to her console and flipping several switches. "They're just performing their functions."

Landscape, sunset, veranda, unicorn, all were gone. The visitors stood in a small cabin bathed in overhead glare. Jolayemi looked furiously at them and then questioningly up at her butler. Divested of his regalia, which had vanished with the other illusions, he was an unmistakable Truscott.

"I do think you might have had the decency to inform me of your identity," she said sharply. "I consider this most deceitful."

Truscott shrugged. "I enjoy your world, Vernice," he said. "You

wouldn't have kept me on, you know." He looked back at the others. "This monster business still?"

Braque nodded. "We have less than an hour to decide about it."

Truscott pursed his thin lips. "Turn on the monitor. I'd like to see this thing in person."

Jolayemi looked at Braque, who nodded firmly. She turned a knob and the monitor lit up. Once more the mutilated behemoth hung in the abyss.

Jolayemi drew in her breath sharply. Truscott gazed at the screen and slowly nodded his head as if to say it was no more than he'd expected. Hilda shrieked wildly and clung to Braque's leg.

"Oh, be quiet, Hilda," Braque said sternly. "It's just a dying monster. The Galaxy's probably thick with them."

Hilda kept shrieking. Ace drew back his arm, but Braque foisted him.

"Hilda," she said, "we can't have this. Be quiet, or Ace will have to hurt you."

With an effort, the ape's voice subsided into muffled sobbing.

"Okay," said Oxender. "Let's get to it, now we're all together. We don't have much time; what are we going to do? Who's got a clear opinion?"

Jolayemi raised her voice shakily. "I have a very firm opinion that if we don't turn that thing off, I will go stark raving insane at once."

"You're so damned delicate," said Truscott, but he turned it off.

"Thank you," she said dryly.

Truscott looked back at Oxender. "I don't see there's any question what we must do," he said seriously. "We've got to stop."

"Stop!" Ace felt a rising panic. "You're mad, Truscott. We don't have any business anywhere near that thing."

"I tend to agree," said Braque. "We've got a straight flight back to Earth. I can't see any real reason to be side-tracked by this phenomenon."

"We could cut closer," suggested Oxender. "Correct to pass it taking observations from a few A. U., but maintain speed."

"That would slow our return to Earth almost as much as veering away," said Braque.

"Oh, be sensible," said Oxender. "That damaged thing's no danger to a light-speed ship. It's our plain duty to get as much information about it as we can. It might be important to humanity, a threat or an opportunity."

"Mankind may well already know about it," pointed out Braque.

"We're getting into the area humans may have reached and colonized by now, even one step at a time. They probably know about these things. I don't want everybody laughing at us when we get back: 'Look at those idiots, they went out of their way to check up on a *Quelk*!'"

"Good point," said Ace, digging for more weed.

"We stop," said Truscott. "I can't see it any other way."

"Why stop?" asked Braque. "What's your rationale, Truscott?"

Truscott rose to his feet and moved towards the door. He paused to look back at them. "You saw that monstrosity," he told them slowly. "You saw that thing, right here in human space. We stop. We hope it's dead. If it's not . . . we kill it ourselves!" He slapped his feet hard on the door frame, and took off into the control area.

The others looked after him.

"Well," Braque summed up briskly for a moment. "Now we've got an idea of where we're at. Ace, you want to change away, I want to keep our set course, Zavan wants to shave closer, and good old murderous Truscott wants to stop and slaughter it. Isn't democracy fun? I almost wish you'd just done your own thing, Ace."

"Three of us want to keep going back to Earth, not stop," said Ace. "That's the important point. One way or another, we keep going."

"Not so fast," said Oxender, dropping to the floor wearily. "I think myself giving that thing a close pass makes the most sense, but I'd rather stop than pass 2000 or more A. U. away. If that's the issue, I'll vote for a full stop. But we can't let Truscott just put that thing out of its misery before we investigate it thoroughly. Not that I see how we'd do in something that big. We aren't really equipped for massacre. Ram the *MariJane* inside that gash, and blow up our accumulators; suicide run—is that what he's thinking?"

A newly unpleasant thought crossed Ace's mind. "What in God's name could have injured that beast so badly?"

"One of the really *unpleasant* creatures in His Galaxy," replied Oxender pleasantly.

Ace shuddered.

"I think," Oxender went on, rising to his feet, "that we are supposed to give the creature a close scrutiny and decide on the basis of that whether to continue or stop to check it out."

"If we don't stop till we're past it, it will take years more to check it out," protested Braque.

"Doesn't matter how long," said Oxender. "If it's the reasonable thing to do. I'm sure that it is. Why else would they have set it up?"

Three sets of eyes turned to him. There was a pause.

"They?" Braque.

"The . . . the examiners, or whatever. The ones who set it all up." Oxender eyed them gravely.

Braque rubbed her eyes. She was beginning to look haggard. "Zavan, I'm not tracking. Who's supposed to have set what up?"

"I hope you don't for one minute believe I think any of this is real," said Oxender.

They looked at him and said nothing.

"Idiots," he said sweetly. "This ship is nothing but a carefully controlled test. It's a total holographic construct itself. Don't you think I know I'm being observed? None of it's real. Neither are any of you." He smiled in a very friendly manner.

Ace gulped. For just a moment, it seemed horribly plausible.

"Excuse me for asking, Zavan," said Braque, "but if we're mere holo images, why are you telling us about it?"

Oxender smiled a bit sadly, shrugged. "Nobody's perfect, I guess."

Ace said quickly, "If you don't believe in any of this, you might as well not have an opinion."

Oxender shook his head. "They've got to know I'm still rational. It's the right opinion. I'm not off my skull like you and Truscott. You'd do anything to stay clear of that creature, and Truscott would do anything . . . What's the matter?"

"Truscott!" snorted Braque, already on her way out the door.

Truscott had carefully removed the plates on the monitor board, cross-circuited the overrides, taped down all six simultaneity buttons, and started countdown on the programmed full braking program by the time the three reached him. On their arrival he curled into a ball and made no attempt to interfere as Braque slapped down the freeze lever and stopped the clock. Hilda danced about in excitement, while Ace kicked Truscott a bit; but kicking a foetal ball wasn't much fun. They unrolled Truscott and marched him back to Jolayemi's quarters.

"Shall I erase the program?" asked Oxender.

"We still haven't decided whether to use it," said Braque. "Leave it for now."

Ace's eye socket was aching where a holo branch had rammed a full inch into his head during the wild dash after Truscott. He wished he'd turned off the screen in the first place. If he'd remembered what these fellow inmates were like, he'd never have looked them up for any reason. He was sure he never would again.

They tossed Truscott roughly onto the floor of Jolayemi's quarters.

"That," panted Oxender, "was a damned stupid thing to try."

"It wasn't very democratic, at least," corrected Braque. "We haven't yet decided whether it was a good decision or not."

"You," said Ace to each and every one of them, "are out of your minds."

Truscott just grinned up at them.

They all sat, catching their breath. Finally Braque turned to Jolayemi, who still sat coldly, trying to ignore them.

"I guess it's up to you, honey," she said with a smile. "Sorry you have to think about it at all, but we seem to be at a deadlock."

"Nonsense," said Ace. "We're heading back to Earth. Truscott just blew his right to decide anything."

"Be fair, Ace," said Braque. "Truscott is a bit precipitous, but he's still got a right to his opinion."

"Leave me alone," said Jolayemi.

"Can't," said Oxender, "till you give us a simple 'stop' or 'don't stop.' Then we'll leave you alone. For the rest of your life. With great pleasure." He reached over and flicked a last switch on Jolayemi's console. The youthful hologramic overlay faded, and the real Vernice Jolayemi sat there, thirty-three going on fifteen hundred years and looking it.

"Give us our answer," said Oxender. "And you can have it all back."

There was a long silence while she looked at them one at a time. She was dressed in work slacks, and her face kept twitching oddly. Finally she looked down at her clasped hands.

"Do you remember when we were all such good friends?" she asked at last, quietly.

They were all silent.

"Just six kids, and we had one great idea," she went on wistfully. "The ships were going out to the nearest stars to colonize. And we thought, suppose we just leapfrogged over everybody, went way out a thousand years to the Quantum Reach, where the civilizations would be, and the new physics and all. And we'd come back after two thousand years, and be heroized, and set up for life. It would take us only twenty years of our lives, and we'd be with the only people we ever really wanted to be with, the five others we . . . loved. So we stole the Crosschopper right out of Lagrange. Do you remember?"

They were all silent.

"What happened to us?" she asked after a pause. "How did we come to hate one another so?"

"Fourteen years of your sick 'love-me-or-drop-dead' didn't help," suggested Truscott suddenly.

She ignored him. "We'll be big people when we get back," she said softly. "If only because of the things we've done, and that we'll likely be the earliest born people on Earth. We'll have it made. And what will we do? I'll look for fairyland in Africa or India, and won't find it. Ace, you'll look for your women; Pronta, for your noble occupation. We'll never see one another any more, never. And in the end, each of us will end up alone with our chosen images again. But in a bare little metal room on Earth, instead of in space."

Her sad little voice dragged to a halt.

Braque dropped to her knees suddenly and looked up at Vernice. "Dear, all we want right now is for you to tell us what you think we should do. Now."

Jolayemi looked at her. "I think," she said slowly, "the very best thing we could do right now, for all of us, is to kill ourselves."

There was a pause as, perhaps, they considered the suggestion.

An abrupt slam caused a general jump. They all turned to look at the door. It had closed.

Ace tried it. "Locked from outside," he grunted. "Jolayemi, unlock it."

"Won't open," she said, perplexed, trying her console.

Braque keyed the monitor screen. "Hilda," she called out. "Hilda, let us out of here."

Truscott suddenly laughed loudly. "Hell she will! The little brute locked us in here."

"Must be," agreed Oxender. "We're all here. But Hilda couldn't do something like that."

"Scared enough, she will," said Truscott. "She's going to be damned sure we stay in here until it's too late to stop. You saw how that monster frightened her."

Ace felt fury building within him. "Why, I'll kill that little . . ." Then realized the right decision had been made, however it had come about. "Or maybe not."

"Hello, Hilda," Braque was saying at the monitor. "What's up? Have there been any business calls for me?"

Oxender pushed Braque aside. "Listen Hilda. Very important. Let us out."

Hilda's frightened stubborn face loomed on the monitor screen. She shook her head.

"Why not? Why not, Hilda?"

Hilda turned her head from the monitor and pointed to the main

console bank behind her, where Truscott's preset program hummed in the machine. One of the simp's hands rested lightly on the freeze lever; the other pointed to the large screen above the banks, where the bleeding hulk drifted in emptiness.

"It hurt. It hurt . . . We help," said Hilda.

Ace's stomach was roaring and his head ached. He was out of weed too.

He heard Braque's voice, mild and faint.

"I'm terribly afraid the little bastard's turned human on us," she was saying. "I didn't catch any question mark at the end of that statement. None at all."

The engines roared, braking.

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# SCRAMBLED HEADS ON LANGWIDERE

by Martin Gardner

*Mr. Gardner is now settled in his new home in North Carolina, where he's always happy to receive letters from his readers; we forward all mail addressed to him care of this magazine.*

Somewhere in the Milky Way a small planet called Langwidere spins around a sun known to Earth astronomers as Oz-1856. The planet is inhabited by a humanoid race of intelligent beings who have the unusual ability to exchange heads whenever they please.

When Langwiderians in good health die, their unconscious, blood-drained heads are preserved by cryogenic techniques and sold for prices that vary with the age, quality, and beauty of the head. Poor persons cannot afford extra heads, but the moderately wealthy may own two or three, and a wealthy man or woman may acquire a headrobe of several hundred. Most hotels on Langwidere maintain supercooled head lockers where guests can store their spare heads.

A trio of attractive young Langwidere ladies, whose first names were Dot, Trot, and Zot, together checked into a resort hotel one summer for a vacation. Each lady brought along just one extra head. When they placed their spare heads in the hotel's head locker, a dim-witted clerk (he had once lost his head in an accident and now wore one with a low-order brain) mixed up the three claim checks and gave them to the ladies in a random order.

"Are you sure our heads will be safe?" asked Dot.

"You can count on it," said the clerk. "The hotel has never had a head stolen or spoiled yet. Enjoy your stay!" What is the probability that at least one lady got her correct head check? The answer is on page 67.



# SCANNERS WRITHE IN PAIN

## by Algis Budrys

*There's a certain symmetry in all this: our book reviewer does movies for The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, while that excellent periodical's book reviewer... but you know what we mean.*

It's a simple, unassuming little exploding-head movie, but it has its charms. *Scanners*, a Canada-made film from David Cronenberg, has a fresh appearance, a hard-driving storyline, some startlingly good grace notes done apparently from sheer pride of craftsmanship, and—of course—Patrick McGoohan.

It also has Jennifer O'Neill to look at, which is what she's best for. It has Stephen Lack, an engaging young actor of considerable ability, but not yet enough scenery-chewing experience to cope with the notably bad dialogue. (It's a pleasure to watch McGoohan twitch, grunt, and scratch his way through what would otherwise be blatantly the year's dumbest expository sentences).

While it has no actual relation to Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain," the story will put you comfortably in mind of Norvell Page's "But Without Horns," Frank M. Robinson's *The Power*, and most especially Fritz Leiber's "The Mutant's Brother." Writer-director Cronenberg is clearly a knowledgeable SF reader as well as a shock film-maker of some renown. His previous credits include *They Came From Within*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood*. So you know in front you're going to get a drive-in thriller that will be simultaneously scary and familiar. But this one, unlike many of that ilk, will be a cult film; the new *Carrie*, the new *Dawn of the Dead*.

I had thought I was alone in that opinion as I trudged away from a preview showing attended by a group of SF professionals and close friends of the field, many of whom had contributed to a sporadic undercurrent of muffled hoots and groans. But I find that a number of rather respected topflight critics across the country, including public television's Gene Siskel, are also strangely taken with it. One or two have declared it superior to the glossy, big-name production of Paddy Chayevsky's *Altered States*, which played across the street from *Scanners* in a variety of locations. So now I feel a little better about my own view, and I find myself pondering what makes one

of these shoestring guignols a work of art.

Not great art, mind you . . . that was decided ten minutes into the film, when that head does explode, on camera—on lovingly dwelling camera. But art—something memorable, something a little captivating; a Quasimodo of a film.

Let's get the plot out of the way. McGoohan is a corporation research doctor, Lack is a "scanner"—a human mutation with poorly defined psychokinetic powers—and there are upwards of 200 scanners in the world. They can read minds, influence behavior, and do poltergeisty things such as raising blood pressure explosively, hurling objects (including people), and inducing pyrokinesis. Most have banded together into a powerful anti-human underground under the leadership of Revok, an older scanner. They also systematically kill all unaffiliated scanners. Most scanners are nut cases. As a younger man, Revok drilled a hole between his eyes "to let the voices out," before escaping from psychiatric detention and forming up his mini-society of fellow outcasts and misfits. Bedevilled by overheard thoughts, often unaware they're the cause of inexplicable epileptic fits, fires, and accidents in the normal society around them, young scanners grow up to be stumblebums or funny-farm inhabitants.

Vale (Stephen Lack) is one of the stumblebums. McGoohan finds him, explains to him what he is, recruits him to track down the underground and to help destroy it before it conquers the world, and sends him on his way. Attempting to trace Revok, Vale meets a second underground—a right-thinking underground—led by Jennifer O'Neill. Revok's minions attack, and the story proceeds via a series of hugger-mugger scenes replete with car crashes, people bursting into flame, melting telephones, a great deal of shotgunning, and a computer-room demolition fully worthy of Irwin Allen's submarine console-destructions in *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. Finally there is a horripilating, properly stomach-turning confrontation between Revok and Vale, and then an ending which claims to be happy, may be intentionally enigmatic, or may simply be inept. The thing is, every time one of these people needs a new power—whenever Cronenberg needs another seat-jumper scene—he or she produces it ad libitum. So after a while, anything's possible.

And mind you, hardly any of these events would have occurred if mastermind Revok had just quietly gone along with his truly foolproof plan to create wave after multigeneration wave of scanners. If he hadn't had his ridiculous penchant for revealing his powers at inappropriate occasions, and his bloodlust for the weak and statistically doomed unorganized scanners, no one, including McGoohan,

could have found him, or interfered with his plans in any significant way. And that includes Vale.

But so much for the impossible task of writing a rational story in which an omnipotent superman loses. Page avoided it, Leiber came closest. Cronenberg saves his own storyline, to the extent it's saveable, by borrowing Leiber's gimmick. But, clearly, it can't really be done, so Revok has to be a fool, the internal logic of early scenes has to be violated later, and you don't know where the hell you are when it's supposedly all over. So forget any speculation that the story may be carrying the burden of making this an impressive film. It's the other way around; the percussive orchestration of explosive violence and pararealistically rent flesh is what drives the audience beyond logic, and even beyond narrative.

The swift, relentless pacing I think has something to do with the film's success. But if that were the whole secret, you would expect a far higher percentage of hits among schlock movies, since the kind of editing we see in *Scanners* means you can save vast amounts of money on establishing-scenes and transition footage by never shooting them.

The special effects abound. Much is made of the exploding-gas-station scene, created by Gary Zeller, who also worked on *Dawn of the Dead*; but when you come right down to it, that's just a glorified Remy Julian car stunt, except that it's static. Much is made of the presence of makeup man Dick Smith, who worked on *Taxi Driver*, *Little Big Man*, and *The Exorcist*. But one has to gather that his services were largely confined to more or less standard makeup requirements for Ms. O'Neill *et al*, because the literally mind-blowing effects—to quote the film's press information packet—are credited to three other individuals.

Their names, according to that typographically erratic news release, are Chris Walas, Tom Schwartz, and Stephen Dupuis. I wouldn't be surprised if that latter name were actually Dupuis. In any event, I'd never heard of them, and no prior credits are listed. I imagine they might have been recruited from the Canadian audio-visual industry. At least one of them has obviously seen *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*, most particularly the scene in which Arthur gradually dismembers the black knight, because—except for the Electric-Penguin-Monster-Film-Making sketch in the TV *Python*—nowhere else in this world has blood ever spurted and dribbled in such a fashion. The climactic scene dissolves in the laughter this occasions. Having grown some rather convincing blisters, and been subjected to a rather nice progressive distension of the surface blood

vessels, and well on his way to bursting into flame and having his eyes pop out while his melting heart boils through his ribcage, the miserable object of this exercise suddenly experiences an episode of looking like a lunatic's parody of a faulty hotwater bottle.

So it's not as if *Scanners* were a masterpiece of movie magic, as a substitute for realistic showing of a compelling if nauseating story. The exploding head is very good. Some of the other makeup-based effects are major league. But inconsistency abounds. The charred corpse found in the final scene resembles nothing but very bad papier-mache sculpture sprayed with brick-red Rust-Oleum.

As it happens, there is some very good sculpture, as sculpture, in the sequences involving a paranoid scanner who has adjusted to society by selling it statues. These—by Montreal artist Tom Coulter—are striking; far beyond any requirement of the film. I wouldn't have one in the house, but only because it would be genuinely haunting. There are lots of good things in this film—cinematographer Mark Irwin's masterly ability to compose a shot, although I'm very desirous that all cinematographers for a while forget about the trick of shifting focus back and forth within the frame; the fresh Montreal exteriors, shot glossily at night and very well, most of them; the imaginative use of pickup interiors shot on location; the unfamiliar faces of the extras and bit players, so far away from any of the major pools of such talent. In fact, having viewed with dismay all the other Canadian Film Board feature-length projects I've seen, I didn't know you could cast a large production in Canada and come up with so few community-playhouse stalwarts.

But again, these things are not consistently good or bad. Toward the end of the film, Irwin is forced to shoot in a real house dressed as a doctor's office. Fighting to find an angle that will let him still get light on O'Neill's face, he's forced to also point his camera at the real sunlight beyond the real windows, and the washed-out effect is uncannily like the printing of California patio porn. Then, some of those bit-player faces and bodies are so much like others that for a while I wondered if it would turn out that scanners are also immortal and regenerative. (They're not. Possibly some of the actors were doubling).

And the dialogue. The action stuff goes along well, because it consists of very short outcries punctuating rather long but generally effective speech-free sequences. But the science gibberish between McGoohan, Lack, and Michael Ironside—who plays Revok the way Dick Butkus would have played him—is remarkable. I haven't heard anything like it since the opening sequence of *Plan Nine From Outer*

*Space*, winner of the Golden Turkey Award for the worst film—sci-fi or not—ever released. Only McGoohan can handle it, by upstaging it to the point where his only remaining move would have been to fling open his raincoat; the other actors are incapable of preventing you from hearing it.

So if cartoon treatment is what's effective in making a cult film in this genre, *Scanners* suffers from incursions of eptitude, or at least of facility. If the opposite is true, then vice-versa. Just when you think you've put your finger on the level of taste or the level of proficiency that confers some quantifiable character on this piece, it changes. What it reminds you of is that in the beginning of the film, being scanned gives you a nosebleed, and at about the middle of the film O'Neill's nose begins to drip when she scans someone. Toward the end, scanners and scanned tend to be wiping their upper lips chronically; that's just before they develop transmigration of souls.

And there, I think, underneath it all, is what does it. As I review my impressions on every aspect of this production, I find myself repeating, as if the phrase were a template that fits all occasions in *Scanners*: "Gee, look how often they did something (half, rather, or really) impressive here, despite their lack of (money, facilities, talent, brains)." Fill in the blanks with your choice of word.

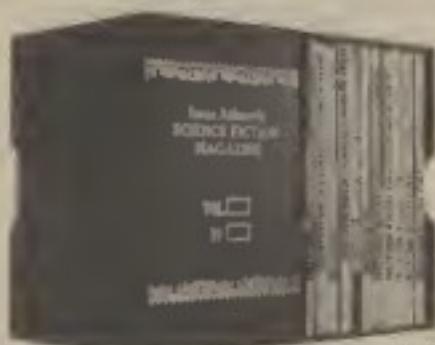
Let me list a series of cult films for you. Not merely cult films in the *Carrie/Rabid/Scanners* genre, but SF cult films of all sorts: *Frankenstein*, *King Kong*, *Rocky Horror Show*, the *Flash Gordon* serials, almost any Hammer film. . . . Every one of them flawed. Most of them united by a common thread of cheap sets, bad actors, terrible process shots, writing that wasn't intended to be camp, bad editing, dull direction. What we honor in the best of them is their crazy genius; the struggle to free the butterfly from the lumpish and often finally intractable material of the cocoon.

I'm not sure whether Cronenberg has the *sui generis* divine shortcomings of *King Kong*'s Merian Cooper or *Frankenstein*'s James Whale. There's a whole generation of film makers who grew up studying those latter masters and their peers of the B-Picture days. Some of the young bloods of Cronenberg's generation—our generation—are thus bound to produce close imitations of the genuine gift without actually having it; their gift is the gift given to the blotting paper. But, of course, that too can be seen as a tearing at the cocoon; the attempt to overcome the circumstances of ability and produce at least glimpses of something that reminds us of a butterfly.

Anybody, after all, can be a first-rate creative genius, given the

essential accident of birth and early nurture. But most of us do not have these advantages. We must sweat and grunt where the golden people trip smilingly; and, no matter how we try, all our piety and wit do not suffice to fully counterfeit the effortless consistency of their instincts. Each time we think our knowledge now suffices, they trump us by producing another power.

So it's for us Earth-people that the world's Cronenbergs work. They affirm us in the process of affirming themselves. Any hack can produce a smooth but ultimately dull and stupid monster movie. It's only those who struggle to transcend monster movies, as we would, who produce the effective monster movies. The dream of creativity—the dream of mastery over the mundane—is given to many more of us than were also given the ability to dream well. We, you and I, we must come to love our broken visions in the night.



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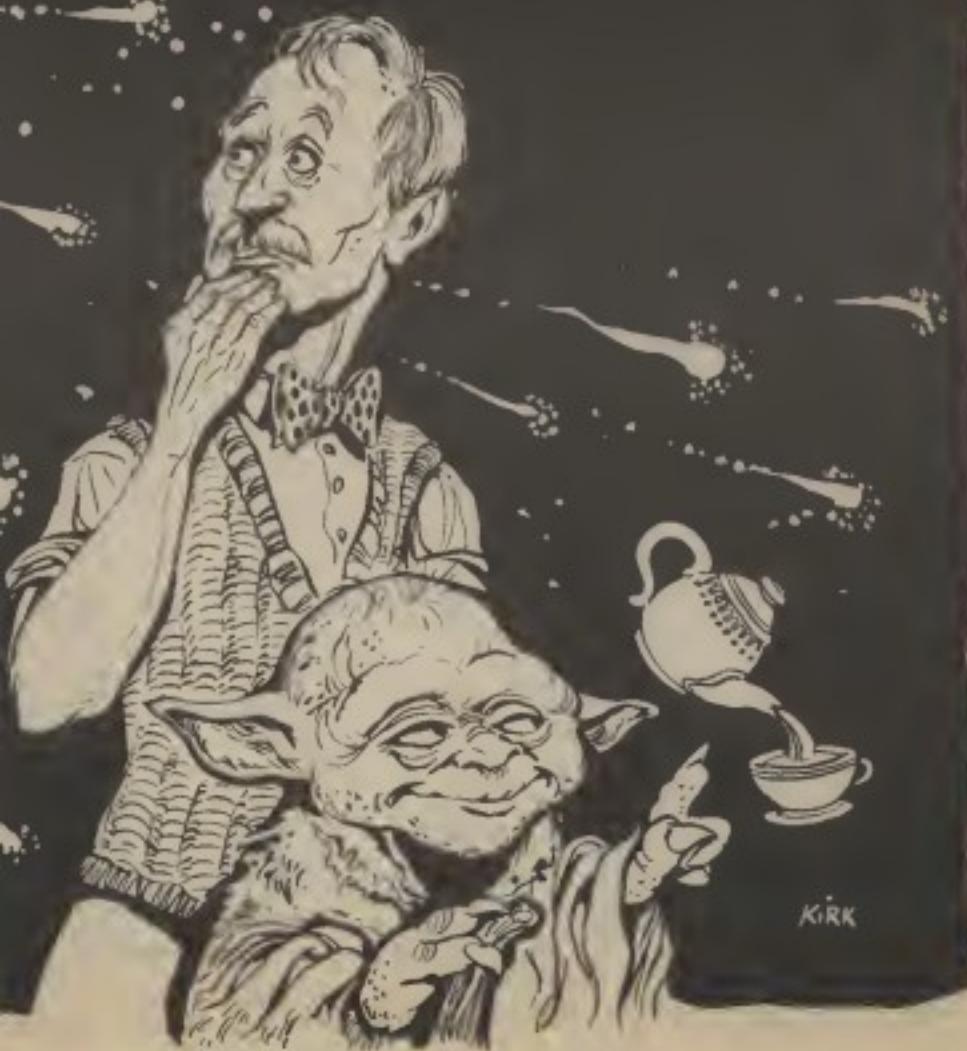
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# CONSTERNATION & EMPIRE

by J. O. Jeppson  
art: Tim Kirk



KIRK

*Although Dr. Jeppson admits to being a psychiatrist with a husband who is a physical scientist, she still insists that Pshrinks Anonymous is purely fictional . . .*

"Who's the handsome stranger?" whispered the Interpersonal to her left-hand neighbor at the luncheon meeting of Pshrinks Anonymous. "Or is he a new member voted in while I was driving my husband around the lecture circuit last month?"

"I can't remember," said the Oldest Member. "The food today is so bad it's affecting what brain I've got left. Maybe he's married to that pretty Eclectic we admitted to membership recently. He's sitting next to her and . . ." He nodded toward the pair, a young, well-built black man and a vivacious black woman.

"No. I've just recalled that *her* husband is a red-headed urologist," said the Interpersonal, examining a strange length of miniature frankfurter floating in her Split Pea Soup Satyriasis.

The stranger, who was exceptionally tall, and wore horn-rimmed glasses, was politely struggling to finish his soup.

"Non-members are against the rules of the Psychoanalytic Alliance," muttered the Oldest Member. "If they are present, how can we satisfy our repressed impulses toward narcissistic verbal diarrhea—after listening selflessly to other people talk all day long—and even more important, how can we complain about the terrible food?"

Since a mutter in the Oldest Member's resonant bass was equivalent to a shout from anyone else, the pretty Eclectic turned to him and said, "I'm sorry. I should have asked permission to bring my brother to lunch. He's in town for a short seminar, and he's got an interesting problem case I thought needed a totally new supervisory opinion from genuine psychoanalytic experts."

The Oldest Member's brow unfurrowed, the other Pshrinks murmured assent with appropriately shy modesty, and at that moment the main course arrived.

"My God, what's that?" asked a Jungian.

"Vicious Veal Vader with Obsessive Obi Olives," read a Pshrink from the one crumpled menu.

"Left over from an SF fan club's dinner, no doubt," said the Interpersonal.

"Chef's been going to the flicks?" said one of the younger Pshrinks who was into movies as an art form.

"He believes in the Force," said one of the waiters.

"I knew it!" said the Oldest Member after the waiters disappeared. "That confounded series of science-fiction movies is driving everyone crazier. It's just as well we have a stranger in our midst to take our minds off the food and onto clinical problems. What's yours?"

The stranger grinned. "By an unfortunate coincidence, my clinical case concerns just that series of films. I'm a Pshrink, too—from another city. I will preserve your club rules and remain anonymous, but for the sake of convenience, call me Luke. May I tell you about my patient—anonimously, of course?"

"Bah!" said the Oldest Member. "I don't know whether I can stand it. I have seen the films—are there three, or four episodes now?—only because my grandchildren insisted; and although I found them moderately amusing, even exciting, I will probably be long gone by the time the series is complete, when the rest of you will be rich from treating the resulting mass hysterical syndromes of belief in the Force. If Hollywood's going to go whooping into the future like that, they should take Freud along."

"Judging from the oedipal implications of the second episode, they have," said another Freudian.

"I'm not at all sure we ought to waste our time talking about silly movies," said an Existential analyst who was fingering a slim volume of verse that bore his name and from which he had not yet had a chance to read aloud.

The waiters reappeared at a trot with dessert dishes which they plunked down on the table, presumably as an inducement for the assembled Pshrinks to hurry up with the veal.

"What could this dessert be?" asked a Kleinian, poking his spoon at a quivering mass.

"Probably Primary Process Psi Pudding," said the Interpersonal.

"Now you cut that out!" said the Oldest Member, who promptly turned to Luke and said, "We apologize for this uninspiring meal. I suppose you might as well enlighten us about the parameters of your problem. I mean, tell us the story."

I will call this patient Mr. C [said Luke] because lately he's been comparing himself to the movie robot C-3PO. Mr. C is a scientist who began analysis with me four years ago because, in spite of his happiness in his marriage, he felt insecure about his profession and worried about his possibilities for advancement. He brooded about his inadequacies and was reluctant to write up his theoretical ideas. Socially timid in college, he had been briefly hospitalized then, after becoming severely depressed when his first girlfriend rejected him.

When he got into graduate school and later married, his depression seemed to have been permanently cured, but his development as a scientist was rather slow.

He and I hit it off well in analysis, although he was at least ten years older than I. He even went through the usual brief early stage of imagining me to be an all-wise authority figure, but by this year he seemed to be in the later stages of analysis, when the patient begins to see the analyst more realistically and know that he or she is not a powerful authority to be leaned on forever.

We worked hard for those four years. Mr. C now has a full-time job as a professor and has written many important papers. I thought of him as one of my more successful cases until they started showing those SF films in round-the-clock marathon sessions. Mr. C began to spend all his spare time at the theatre.

Once he arrived at my office in a state of great excitement, red-eyed from watching the original Luke's adventures all night. "It's a psi experience," he exclaimed. "The Force! I can't stop thinking about it—in every sense of the word."

I assumed that this ordinarily down-to-earth patient was not getting mystical. "Force as in physics?" I asked.

"That's right. My field. I'm seething with ideas about force, but they need germination. I can't talk about them with anyone."

"Okay," I said. This was nothing new.

He switched to talking about problems connected with finding time for sex when there's a small child in the house who won't go to sleep early.

"Time for sex?" I asked. "Haven't you been at the movies every night?"

He looked wounded and I felt countertransferrential. "You don't understand," he said. "It's important to go back again and again, immersing myself in the blessed simplemindedness of Hollywood that glows with technicolor and deafens with stereophonic sound—I tell you it knocks out my inhibitingly-rational left cortex so that my creatively talented right cortex can play with the concept of force. I'm getting somewhere—I know it!"

"Creatively?"

"I'm going to make a scientific breakthrough at last—I'll be famous and . . . and . . ."

I waited several minutes after his voice died away but he merely gulped and looked anxious. "You don't want to be famous?" I ventured.

"I've never asked myself that question," he said. "Damned if I

know the answer."

"Well . . ."

"All right—all right! I think I know. I do want to be famous, very famous—but only for something—well, good."

"Your breakthrough, whatever it is, may be good?"

"Hell, yes. When it comes, I'll explain it to you—and to the whole world."

"Why can't you explain at least something about it now?"

"Because I must make absolutely certain . . ."

"Of what?"

"Of goodness." He smiled. "Now don't try to analyze this as my resistance to success, Luke."

"What do you mean? Who is Luke?"

"That's you. Haven't you seen the movies?"

From that session on, Mr. C became more resistive. He denied any fear of success, and instead described fantasies of winning the Nobel prize for science. His persistence in calling me "Luke" forced me to confront him.

"Do you refer to me as 'Luke' because you're trying to deny your fear of me as a possibly malign authority figure? In those films there's a powerful, wicked character dressed in mysterious black . . ."

Mr. C burst into loud laughter. He, by the way, is white.

Suddenly I realized that he was tremendously relieved, and I managed to shut up about my theory and listen to his.

"I'm close to the answer, Luke. Soon I'll be able to prove to the world that I'm right, with unassailable mathematics. I want to tell you all about it very soon. It's got to do with lines of force extending, expanding—I suppose my thinking wasn't just triggered off by those films, because the important part of the theory is the aspect of continuing, and that thought started with the birth of my son, a continuing of me, in a way. You needn't go into heavy analysis of that because it's not so neurotic. Neither is the fundamental problem of cosmological physics I'm working on."

"Then I'm not the authority figure . . ."

"No, Newton is. It's too bad that poor old Newton wouldn't have understood me either, although he whomped up the basic idea of his second law."

I was still mystified. Newton's second law is, as you all remember [the Oldest Member tugged morosely at his left moustache],  $F = ma$ , but Mr. C would not explain how this related to whatever fundamental problem of cosmological physics he was into.

I dug into my intuition. "You don't imagine that Newton's F is CONSTERNATION & EMPIRE

the same as the Force in those movies, do you?"

Mr. C chuckled. "You're learning, Luke, you're learning." Evading my more analytic questions, he described at length both the altered state of consciousness he'd achieved the night before in the theatre, and the complaints of his deprived wife. He seemed uncommonly cheerful and left on a clear high, still calling me Luke.

The very next time he walked into my office looking like gloom frozen over, so depressed he could barely talk. His head sagged, his voice was dull and slow, and the first thing he said was,

"Did you know that a dyne of force will cause one gram of mass to accelerate one centimeter per second?"

"That's first-year physics, isn't it?"

He nodded glumly, and did not answer any more of my questions until I came up with, "Do you believe you've found a realistic answer for the psi powers exhibited by the characters in the films?"

"Huh?" he said, with obvious astonishment.

I repeated it, but he seemed bewildered, so I tried again. "Are you working on the idea that you can measure what they call 'The Force' in the films?"

"Perhaps."

"I suppose if you could demonstrate the reality of The Force, then everyone could have those powers of moving solid objects through air—telekinesis as good as Luke's . . ."

"Telewhat?"

Since I have been trying valiantly to make contact with the patient by entering the same ball game, so to speak, I was annoyed and explained about the movie Luke's accomplishments with psi talents.

"Oh, that," said Mr. C. "Sure. Don't worry about anything, Luke. I like you and wouldn't want to make you worry. I'll be glad to consider telekinesis for you. Perhaps it's simply a tuning in to the force of expansion so that gravity is overcome. How about that? Good enough for an SF story?"

"I wasn't really that interested in telekinesis," I said. "I wanted to find out why you seem depressed today."

"Don't worry about it, Luke. Play with something else. Does Hollywood, for instance, believe that The Force is a manifestation of God? And that gravity is the Devil? Or maybe it's the other way around. We could make a scenario out of that, couldn't we, young Luke?"

I tried to intervene, but he was off and running into free associations I couldn't follow and had no success in interrupting. Soon he was playing out loud with equations that would have been beyond

me even if I still remembered differential calculus. The analysis was out of control and I couldn't get back to our previous level of mutual work on his ordinary psychological problems.

Mr. C's gloom persisted into subsequent sessions; and it took me much too long to catch onto the fact that he was talking about psi factors and the movie Force merely to entertain me, as if he were trying to protect me from something. Finally, I asked him about it.

"No point in depressing both of us."

In desperation, I started to guess again. "What is it? Do you wish I possessed the powers of the film character, Luke?"

"It wouldn't help."

"What do you mean?"

"Doesn't matter. Nothing matters."

"Why?"

"Nothing matters—is a literally true statement. I might as well give up."

"Give up trying to solve your theoretical problem?"

"Oh, no. I've solved that."

"You have!"

"Why the hell do you think I'm depressed?"

"I don't know. You haven't told me."

"Well, that's why. I solved it. I know the answer." He put his head in his hands and groaned. "I suppose I should say I'm ready to give up—everything. Living. Because I've given up hope."

Was he suicidal? Should I hospitalize him as he had been in college? Should I medicate him? I remained silent, turning over these possibilities in my mind.

"Don't worry, Luke," said Mr. C, as if he'd been reading my mind. "I'm not going to do away with myself, and I'm not crazy. I don't even believe in crazy things like devils—" he grunted. "The Devil. Mephistopheles. Right initial, anyway. Maybe it is."

"Please explain what you're talking about!"

"Can't burden anyone."

"Anyone in particular—besides me—that you're afraid to burden?"

"You're too damn smart, Luke. You know. It's my son. So young. Will he go crazy when he finds out the truth? Eventually somebody else will discover it, and probably in my son's lifetime."

"Truth? About what? Your previous depressive episode occurred when your girl rejected you. Do you feel rejected now, by anyone, for any reason?"

"Yes! The damn Universe!"

"But . . ."

"I know, I'm part of the Universe and therefore I can't be rejected and dammitall I didn't mind finding out when I was a kid that I was as mortal as anyone else and that everyone dies, and finding out later than I had to come to terms with everything ending, even a romantic dream; but I guess I always thought there was an out. Well, there isn't. And that's all I'm going to say on this damn subject."

And it was. He left my office early, saying that he didn't know whether or not he'd ever be back. There's a session scheduled for the day after I return home, but I doubt if he'll show up unless I call and tell him to come in. And if he won't tell me what he's depressed about, and I can't figure it out—what's going to happen?"

When Luke finished speaking, there was a surreptitious scraping noise as legs were recrossed and alternate elbows leaned on.

Everyone looked depressed.

"Like the food today, that case history was not calculated to uplift the spirits," said an Eclectic sourly.

"I'm sorry," said Luke, "but I think I need help. I'm afraid that if this man's depression gets worse he may actually quit work."

"Are you afraid he'll quit life?" asked the Oldest Member.

Luke took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know that no Pshrink can be certain about these things; but I've known Mr. C for four years, and I have to say no. Besides, he's too devoted to his wife and child to commit suicide, which often is, as you know, a hostile act aimed at other people who are supposed to suffer for what you do to yourself."

"Are you afraid Mr. C will never fulfill his ambition of making a contribution to humanity?" asked the Existentialist.

"I'm sure he thinks he won't now."

"It sounds," said the Interpersonal, "as if Mr. C thinks he's making a contribution by shutting up."

"Yes," said Luke, "and somehow I've failed him. I should be able to figure out why he's depressed."

"It's quite simple," said the Oldest Member kindly. "Your patient is afraid that his wife will reject him in favor of her child. In fact, since it's difficult finding time for sex with an active child on the premises, it could be said that rejection is already taking place, bottling up Mr. C's libido. This man is suffering from the oedipal effects of having a son."

"How about the wife?" asked the Interpersonal. "Isn't she suffering sexual deprivation also? How does that fit with your oedipal theory?"

And wouldn't a daughter be just as much in the way?"

"Daughters," said the Oldest Member with a fondly reminiscent gleam in his eye, "are another matter—for fathers."

"Now let's not get into a classical argument," said a Pshrink who did family therapy in addition to analysis. "We're not helping Luke here."

"I think some other psychic trauma is involved," said Luke, "because Mr. C went on to say that while mystics ask if you can have a sound when there's no one there to hear it, physicists should ask whether or not you can have a force if there's nothing to exert it."

"That proves your patient is worried about God, not sex," said Luke's sister.

"Maybe, but he also said that in order for a force to be exerted, a natural field has to exist. At least I think I heard him say 'natural.' Perhaps Mr. C has been working on unified field theory."

The Oldest Member sighed. "I don't understand any of that. In fact, I find all of modern physics to be not only difficult but depressing. I liked the old Newtonian physics in which all problems seemed solvable—everything either moves or is at rest, energy is in known quantities—as we say in my trade, a little libido lost here or conserved there. So neat. The Newtonian universe was pleasant, placid, and predictable. Of course, I liked the universe best when I could believe it neither began nor ended. . . ."

"I think Mr. C might agree with you on that," said Luke.

"A clue!" shouted the Interpersonal, leaping up from her chair. "I'll be right back." She ran from the room as if pursued by eighteenth-century devils.

The Oldest Member raised his bushy silver eyebrows. "You can never tell what a menopausal female will do."

"But what's the clue?" asked Luke's sister.

"Pass the after-dinner mints," said the Oldest Member firmly.

"I'm afraid they're stale," she said.

"I don't care."

Luke shrugged and ate his pudding. The other Pshrinks looked dolefully at their watches. The Oldest Member munched mints.

"No," said the Oldest Member at last. "I try to keep up with modern science, but I disapprove of the indefiniteness, the appalling uncertainty . . ."

"That's why you're an antediluvian Freudian in theory even if you're a hotshot clinician in practice," said the Interpersonal, slipping back into the dining room.

"And you *like* uncertainty?" asked the Oldest Member.

"Happiness," said the Interpersonal, "is said to exist when you like what you get, not when you get what you like."

"And uncertainty . . . ?"

"Is what we get."

The Oldest Member frowned. "Then what were you doing outside the room—having a hot flash?"

"No—calling my husband. He understands physics better than I do. He confirmed my idea—if you rearrange Newton's equation, you get  $m = F/a$ ."

"So?"

"Maybe Luke's patient has been working on Newton's equation, rearranged that way. Maybe he thinks—either realistically through genuine mathematics or mystically through the psychic effects of an overdose of filmed SF—that he's the first person to discover how to calculate the true quantity of force!"

Blank stares greeted her last remark.

The Oldest Member, twisting one of the waxed tips of his moustache, said, "I admit that in spite of being female and non-Freudian, you have always been reasonably sane; but am I to understand that you think Luke's patient has calculated the mysterious Force of those films?"

"I don't know whether even Mr. C would call his force the very same as that Force, since who knows what Hollywood had in mind besides making money. I think Mr. C means the force of expansion," said the Interpersonal.

"Of the Universe?" asked Luke, his eyes widening.

"I see that rings a bell," said the Interpersonal.

"Yes, I think I get what you're driving at," said Luke. "No wonder Mr. C is depressed, given the sort of conscientious, humanitarian person he is. And that aspect of mortality must seem to him like a final rejection."

"Most men displaced by sons become preoccupied with mortality," persevered the Oldest Member.

"Perhaps," said the Interpersonal gently, "but what may be more upsetting to Mr. C is the inevitable death of what one loves, especially people and things one counts on to continue one in some sense."

"Ah. I see," said the Oldest Member. "Is that what he meant by 'continuing'?"

"And," said the Interpersonal, "perhaps he thought he could prove that death would not conquer *everything*. This would explain his manic enthusiasm when he was going to the films and working on

his theory."

"Which has backfired on him," said Luke.

"But what has your patient actually discovered and how?" wailed a Pshrink whose frustration tolerance had apparently come to a boil.

The Interpersonal raised her eyebrows. "The implications of being able to measure the F in  $m = F/a$  are obvious."

The Oldest Member glared at her. "I may spank you—with Great Force!"

"But  $m = F/a$  means that you can discover  $m$  if you know the other side of the equation," said the Interpersonal. "The rate of expansion of the universe is known, subject to some argumentation, and if Mr. C has figured out the amount of force . . ."

"Whoa!" shouted the Oldest Member. "What Force?"

"The one behind the Big Bang, I assume."

"That must be right," said Luke excitedly. "Mr. C was saying something about measuring the beginning, and I now realize he must have meant that measuring the force of expansion is equivalent to knowing the force of the original explosion."

"I still don't see why he's depressed," said Luke's sister.

"Because of  $m$ ," said the Interpersonal.

"M is for the many things she gave me," sang one of the more waggish Ego Psychologists, who was promptly shushed by the assembled Pshrinks.

"Maybe you're right," said the Interpersonal with a laugh, "for  $m$  is like mother. If  $a$  is the acceleration of expansion of the Universe, and  $F$  is the force of the expansion, then  $m$  is the mass of the Universe, the mother of us all. Poor Mr. C. He must have thought he was going to prove that  $m$  is below critical, but when he calculated  $F$ ,  $m$  turned out to be otherwise."

"Maybe that's clear to you," the Oldest Member began.

"I can explain," said Luke, his eyes glowing. "To Mr. C, real 'continuing' meant that the Universe would keep expanding. He probably thought there'd be some way of avoiding the heat death when the infinitely expanding Universe dies out in increasing entropy, but possibly he was just looking forward to a much longer time for life to continue."

"If  $m$  is big enough," said the Interpersonal as the Oldest Member began to chew on his moustache, "the expansion of the Universe will stop. Eventually the Universe will collapse."

"And everything will die," said the Existentialist mournfully, clutching his book of poems. "Even critics."

Luke nodded. "I've got to help reconcile Mr. C to the fact—if his

equations are right and it *is* a fact—that the death of the Universe is inevitable."

There was silence for a moment in the dim dining room of the Psychoanalytic Alliance. The Pshrinks stared down at their empty plates and sighed.

Suddenly the Oldest Member sat upright, scowling fiercely past his now limp moustache. "See here! You've got to reassure that patient—I know it isn't strict analytic technique but it's necessary—about one psychological certainty. Humanity is *not* going to go insane if he publishes his work. The capacity for denial is almost infinite in human beings. I, for one, do not intend to let the Universe worry me. I have to worry about the small forces in each human life I see—including my own."

Chairs were pushed back and murmurs rose:

"Got to remind my wife to make those plans for our trip to Alaska in the wildflower season . . ."

"I'm speaking to my agent this afternoon about promotion for my book . . ."

"I won't put off that teaching job any longer—I think I have something to offer . . ."

"Did you notice that item in the paper about a possible cure for Dutch Elm disease? . . ."

In animated groups, the other Pshrinks left, talking furiously.

The young Eclectic and her brother remained with the Interpersonal and the Oldest Member. The mints were all gone.

"I still don't know why I'm 'Luke' to Mr. C," said the visitor.

The Interpersonal answered slowly. "I confess that I've been to all those films; and I like them, even if I do have to wear ear plugs throughout due to the decibel level. Therefore I can hazard a guess. Mr. C claims to see himself as a dithering, doubting robot but perhaps he has a secret self-image. If he calls you 'Luke' because you're young and don't understand a fundamental cosmological issue—then isn't he likely to want to be your *teacher*?"

"I'd better ask Mr. C if his ears are growing," said Luke happily.

"Never forget," said the Oldest Member, with a wink at the Interpersonal, "that no matter what our theoretical differences are, in the long run our patients become our teachers."

"Exactly," said the Interpersonal.

"I sympathize with Mr. C," said the Oldest Member. "I don't like being taught that the Universe will definitely collapse. One can't quite believe that all's well that *ends*."

"Wait!" said the Interpersonal. "Modern physics can give an out.

Luke, try telling your patient—no, try *asking* your patient if he's positive that there has to be complete certainty about the end—or the beginning—any beginning, even the next one."

"What do you mean?"

"Your patient risked uncertainty. He took a chance—in having a son, in giving birth to a theory. How does he, or anyone else, know for sure whether or not the Universe might not give birth to another?"

"That's a thought. He and I could talk about the Universe having a baby!"

"It's fun," said the Interpersonal, "thinking that even a certainty has its uncertainties."

The Interpersonal and the Oldest Member strolled uptown, arm in arm.

"I feel like an old fogey," he said. "I'd never have figured that out to help Luke. I'm an ignoramus."

"Nonsense," she said. "You're the last person I'd ever think of as a spent Force."

## ANSWER TO SCRAMBLED HEADS ON LANGWIDERE (from page 47)

Call the ladies D, T, and Z. Their three head checks can be permuted in just six equally possible ways:

DTZ TDZ ZDT DZT TZD ZTD

Assuming the correct order is DTZ, it is easy to see that in four of the six cases at least one lady gets her correct check. The probability of this occurring, therefore, is  $4/6 = 2/3 = .6666\ldots$

For one person and one check, the probability of getting the right check obviously is 1. For two people with randomized checks the probability at least one check is right goes down to 1/2. As we have seen, for three people it jumps back up to 2/3. For four persons there are 24 equally possible permutations, of which 15 have at least one check correct, so the probability lowers to  $15/24 = 5/8 = .625$ . As  $n$  (the number of persons) increases the probability alternately bobs up and down, but with rapidly diminishing increments. In the long run the sequence "strangles" (converges on) a limit. What is this limit? Turn to page 95 for the answer.

# COMMENTARY ON "I THINK I STARTED SOMETHING"

by Chuck Crayne

*Mr. Crayne is a consulting systems engineer for a large computer company.*

*His wife, Dian Girard, occasionally writes for this magazine, and is also a computer programmer. Both are familiar with Dr. Pournelle's word processing equipment and programs, discussed recently in these pages.*

Leaving aside the fanciful opening paragraphs, Jerry Pournelle's article "I Think I Started Something" can be divided into a summary of the current state-of-the-art in personal-computer word-processing systems and a prediction of the effect of this technology on the future of the publishing industry in general and *IA'sfm* in particular.

In regard to the present, I have but nits to pick with Jerry. The claim that Ezekial (Jerry's anthropomorphic personal computer) is "about a hundred times more powerful than the best machines of the '60s" is exaggeration for conversational effect. Its only claim to credibility lies in the fact that **powerful** is a term without an agreed upon definition. As only one case in point, 1100-line-per-minute printers were common even on the smaller machines of the 1960s. Ezekial prints at less than two percent of that rate.

When the comparison is made on price per a given amount of performance, however, the result is at least as impressive as Jerry claims. He and I and many others now have computing capabilities in our homes which a decade ago only a corporation (and two decades ago only a government) could afford. Since computer technology shows no signs of slowing down, another decade should make home computers as common as hi-fi sets are today and much more important to everyday life.

This brings us to Jerry's jibe about putting *IA'sfm* out of business. The necessary technology exists today. The *Columbus Dispatch*, in cooperation with the Associated Press, is now conducting an experiment of feeding all of its copy into a computer database. By next summer (1981) they will be joined by the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, and a number of others. I (and about 3000 other

CompuServe users) can access this information via my home computer. Electronic mail is already a reality for many terminal users. IBM, Xerox, and several other large companies are actively developing products to extend this concept to millions of businesses worldwide.

Not everyone is welcoming this spread of technology with open arms. Guild spokesmen for the Twin Cities Newspaper Guild in Minneapolis maintained that the electronic newspaper was a major issue in their recent 27 day strike. The concerns were who would do the work for the electronic newspaper, what protection there would be against layoffs caused by elimination of existing jobs, and how the profits would be shared.

However, major changes to our lifestyles are not determined so much by technology as by economics. What about the economics of electronic magazines? The most common speed used for data transmission to and from home computers is 30 characters per second (or about 300 words per minute). The current charges for evening access to the data base referenced above is \$5.00 per hour of connect time. Thus to receive a complete copy of *IA'sfm* would (today) cost me about \$25.00 and tie up my computer for five hours. And at that I would not get any of the interior illustrations or the color cover.

On the other hand, many commercial computer users are routinely using speeds of up to 4800 words per minute on regular dial telephone lines, and up to 50,000 words per minute on special leased lines or satellite circuits. If indeed another decade will bring today's commercial environment into the home, then the same issue of *IA'sfm* will be available for a transmission cost of only about 16 cents, which does compare favorably with postage rates. To this, however, I still have to add the cost of local printing, since I will probably want to read the magazine at times and places where I do not care to take my computer, such as the bathroom, the subway, etc.

In short, although Cheryl Harbottle will probably receive all of her reading materials over her comlink, the near-term application of this technology will be for data such as news and stock market reports where the reader wishes to view only a portion of the material available and where timeliness is of prime importance.

Since a subscriber to *IA'sfm* presumably wishes to read every last word, and since the stories are timeless (so to speak) it should be one of the last to survive in the traditional published form.

# THE COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT

by John Brunner

art: Alex Schomburg



*Here, a salvo of six—whatevers—  
from Mr. Brunner, currently  
of Somerset, England.*

## Xylem III—date as hypermark

Gentlebeings! When my employers, the Galactic Exploitation Company, sent me here, they supplied me with a KRAPO (one of your Knowledgeable, Reliable and Portable Oracles).

Too late, I discovered they'd palmed off on me a model equipped with an obsolete facility known as "a sense of humour." Whatever this may have been, I need advice on how to get rid of it.

In order to close a contract with the dominant species here (vegetable beings, free-moving in the juvenile stage, but normally stationary and respectable in later life, when they attain a mass comparable with terrestrial redwoods and surround themselves with

a carpet of low-growing chlorophyll-based commensals), I promised I would locate, and persuade to settle down, the eldest offspring of the planetary president, who had caused a scandal by unduly postponing the termination of his mobile phase.

A simple enough undertaking, surely! But all your machine will tell me is, "He was never one to let his feet grow under the grass."

Yours despondently:

[snigged]

Forrest Woods

#### Piscator IV—date as watermark

Gentlebeings! I gather I'm not the only employee of the Galactic Exploitation Company to be having trouble with one of your KRAPOs, but my colleague on Xylem isn't in half the mess I'm in on this waterlogged planet!

On the surface (and you've no idea how apt that image is on Piscator, with its handful of tiny islands, horribly over-populated, wholly dependent for protein on the subaquatic ecosphere) this seemed like a perfectly straightforward assignment. There's a food crisis because most of the native species of fish are unfit to eat except in the juvenile stage. It's a mark of status to catch as many of them as possible before they become tough and inedible.

My company has invested billions in a scheme to postpone maturity by adding a simple chemical to the ocean. It would double the food-supply. If only I could get hold of the planetary president to make my case to him! But he's been refusing my calls ever since I arrived, and when I ask my KRAPO to suggest a reason, it only says, "He has other fry to fish."

Yours dismally:

[snagged]

Elva Pout

#### Sutor, Ultra Crepidam—date as vote-mark

Gentlebeings! The so-called *knowledgeable* KRAPO which my employers, Galactic Exploitation, stuck me with when they sent me here, is failing to live up to expectations . . . to put it mildly.

The question of whether or not to sign a contract with the company has been the subject of half a dozen referendums. Each one has ended in a three-way tie. Doesn't matter how often they try again—every time, the vote is so close it's legal for the candidates to require a

recount, and every recount works out differently, so they have to start over! If only the tie could be broken, there'd be no problem.

And there oughtn't to be a problem! Two of the front-runners are professional politicians, and we could deal with either of them fine. The fly in the ointment is a chef turned chain-restaurant owner, with grandiose ambitions—too grandiose, considering he's best known for mass-marketing a deep-dish fruit pie and a drink made of wine, sugar, and crushed ice.

I keep asking how we can get rid of him, but all your machine will say is, "Let the last stick to his cobblers."

Yours, desperately:

[rigged]

Noah Pyecraft

### Recyclon W—date as trademark

Gentlebeings! When Galactic Exploitation sent me one of your KRAPO computers I hoped my troubles were at an end.

This is a planet inhabited by robotoids that adore incorporating bits of other species' machinery into themselves, on condition that they, as it were, "taste" good. We believed we had a perfect market for our overstocks of mechanical time-keepers. There was a recent fad for them which died out.

We thought we had developed an ideal method of preserving and marketing them, which involved initial sterilisation in hot water. We even packaged them in glass jars so they could be inspected without opening before purchase.

We made a number of trial sales, and all seemed to be going well. Then all of a sudden the market dried up, and the locals told us that they didn't like our cogs and dials after all.

Well, I could put up with that kind of setback—I'm a philosophical type—if only it weren't for the supercilious attitude of that damned KRAPO! Every time I turn it on, all it will say is, "You should have known that a boiled watch never pots."

Yours disgruntledly:

[brined]

Hans Fehss

### Olfax Beta—date as mark-up

Gentlebeings! Your Knowledgeable, Reliable and Portable Oracle, as supplied to me by the Galactic Exploitation Company, is living up to the first syllable of its acronym.

This planet is universally renowned as the source of our finest

and costliest perfume. It's derived from a form of moss which, after spending its early life attached to rocks, dries up without warning and is carried off by the wind in the manner of terrestrial tumble-weeds. Consequently harvesting is a lengthy and expensive process.

We leased a large tract of land from the natives because our chemists had determined that all the ingredients of the perfume were already present before the moss blew away. It seemed pointless to hunt it half across the planet.

But what we extract from the fresh moss bears no resemblance to what the natives produce out of the odd bits they catch on their way past during the seasonal gales. Now they're laughing at us behind their hand-equivalents, and when I interrogate my KRAPO, all it will tell me is, "A rolling moss gathers nose tone."

Yours disconsolately:

[sniffed]

Pat Chouli

### Thanatos—date as roastmark

Gentlebeings! HELP! On this planet the brains of the dominant species can continue to analyse current problems for up to a year after all other bodily activities cease. Great teachers now and then arrange to "die" while considering matters of major importance; techniques exist to elicit the answer by evoking their last tiny spark of life-energy.

Clearly, if such a teacher were to say, "Open trade with Galactic Exploitation," it would be a tremendous coup.

I therefore obtained a post-mortem hypnosis device, which I sneaked into the cylindrical container holding the body of a suitable teacher. (These containers later double as coffins—once the brain is dead, the Thanatians recycle the lot.)

Unfortunately the door of the cylinder was perfectly reversible, and—being unable to read the local script—I must accidentally have left it facing the wrong way, for the following morning automatic machinery shunted the teacher to the municipal central-heating furnace. Now another teacher has "died" in order to work out what went wrong, and I'm horribly afraid he'll manage it, so I appealed to my KRAPO for advice. But all the damned thing will say is that one side of the door read DARE NOT DISTUBE and the other PLEASE BREAK UP THIS TOMB NOW.

Yours disgustedly:

[singed]

Wanda Burnham



**TRADEGROUND EYES**  
by Coleman Brax  
art: Alicia Austin



*Coleman Brax reports that he has just moved to California after spending the first 37 years of his life on the East Coast. He, so far, does not miss the snow. The story you are about to read (his eighth sale) was the first prepared on his new word processor, to which he admits he is partial.*

It was late morning when Mone Clan's caravan arrived at the periphery of the tradeground. Hazlim, seated behind the driver of the second wagon, clutched a holdring with one hand while he rested his other wrist on his fur-clad thigh. The hard seat jolted him as the wheels bounced over the rutted road.

"You are still sleepy," he heard Kep say. For the moment, Hazlim could not see his older brother who sat beside him. He reached his free hand towards the muscular lump of fur perched on his left shoulder, then pressed his thumb against the coarse-haired snout to turn the animal's eyes towards Kep. Through the creature's vision, Hazlim observed his brother's bristly face and his thick fur jacket. "Did you catch me nodding?"

The brother smiled. His beard was a tangle of reddish curls; his jacket was of rich umber. The self-colors on his face, however, were what captured Hazlim's attention. About Kep's forehead hung tinges of malice. "I saw you drooping," Kep said. "Your open eyelids prove nothing to me."

"Tell me when we have reached the tradeground's center," Hazlim answered. "Then I'll have reason to be awake." Beyond Kep, he glimpsed fur-garbed figures gesturing at each other through the dust-filled air. He reached again for the creature's head, and twisted it gently to scan the traderings near the side of the road. He saw livestockers in their sewn hide caps, and grey-shawled spinners, but he glimpsed none of the red and violet clothing he had observed at previous seasons.

"I can guess what interests you," said Kep, knocking his fist against the seat. "There will be Offworlders in numbers to sate your curiosity."

"I know your thoughts . . ."

Kep's cheeks above his beard flared with self-hues of anger. "They come for amusement only . . . to laugh at our old-fashioned ways. If it were up to me, I'd drive them off."

"With what, Kep? With the points of our lances?"

"We outnumber them many times over. If the Council were not peopled with weaklings, we would be rid of the Offworlders."

Hazlim touched the shoulder of his jacket where Eyes's talons held its perch. "Do not forget the benefits from these strangers."

"Ah, your animal," Kep replied with unconcealed distaste.

"Kep!"

"I know that you are not helpless without it."

The creature turned its attention towards a rail-fenced trading that already had been occupied. Hazlim glimpsed two Warewagons surrounded by the members of the pair of Clans that were about to enter negotiations. He brought back Eyes's gaze; about Kep's tightened lips there rippled a pattern of jealousy displayed in tiny tongues of color.

"You will see your Offworlders," Kep muttered. "If we ever get ourselves through this intersection."

Hazlim realized that the wagons had been stationary for several minutes. He directed Eyes's view towards the first wagon, which stood just ahead at a position half-way into a turn. Its driver was clearly flustered by the stream of traffic that blocked his progress. Indeed, the passing procession of livestocker Clans with their bobbing beasts appeared endless.

"Uncle seems lacking in courage today," said Kep in reference to the driver of the first wagon.

"Nothing pleases you this morning," Hazlim retorted. "First the Offworlders, and now Uncle Doze."

"I can drive wagon better than most," Kep said. "If I were leading the caravan, I would already be moving us down the main path."

"Patience, Kep. Your time of rank will come."

"It is easy for you to tell me that. You with your animal and your colors that nobody else can see. You didn't have to wait your turn."

"Turn?" Hazlim puzzled over Kep's shimmering nostrils. The iridescence was complex, difficult to decipher. "Oldma cares nothing for me except during the trading."

Before Kep could frame a reply, Uncle Doze shouted "Ha-yee!" Hazlim noted that the stream of traffic had opened and that the intersection was now available for the passage of Mone Clan. He dismissed Kep's ill temper and leaned forward in anticipation.

Doze's wagon began to roll, but the driver of number two had some difficulty with his beasts. The pair of *rampad* did not respond immediately to his twitch of the reins. Hazlim watched his impatience grow as a gap developed between Doze's wagon and number two. The driver swatted the right-hand *rampad* smartly on its flank and

it lurched ahead dragging its mate after it. Wooden joints groaned as the wagon tilted, then jerked forward. Hazlim lost his balance; Kep fell against him.

They both went down. Hazlim first saw a glimpse of cloud-specked sky as he toppled. The pressure of Eyes's grip on his shoulder slackened; he felt a grazing blow, then a dragging of the talons from their hold on his coat. The animal screeched as the sky view turned into one of uprushing mud . . . of spokes . . . of an approaching wheel. The images ceased.

The darkness was not total; he received faint, almost colorless impressions from the minds of those around him. Humans lacked the animal's transmissive powers; the weak images from the others on the wagon superimposed themselves to create a jumble of dusky shapes.

By touch, he located the rough seat, then pulled his body back up onto it. Already he could hear the shouts among the wagons, words that were carrying the news of the accident to Oldma's ears. The thought of her anger at the loss was almost more painful than the fact of the loss itself. The Clan was now bereft of its most valuable trading tool. Henceforth it would be on equal footing with the other Clans. Hazlim wished that he were young enough to weep.

There was no choice for him but to continue clutching the holdring. He felt the wagon roll on through the tradeground, but the rich images from Eyes were gone. He tried to explain to himself what had taken place, but his thoughts would not hold together.

Kep spoke at last, his voice strained. "You were not to blame for the loss. I'll try to tell Oldma. She sometimes listens to what I say."

Hazlim caught a murky impression of his own face from Kep's eyes. Were those tear streaks running into the scraggle of his beard? He reached up to touch the wet surface of his cheek.

"This shouldn't have happened, Hazlim. But don't lose yourself in regrets. There may be a way to get another one of those creatures."

Hazlim wished that he could see the self-colors across his brother's face. He answered hoarsely. "Nobody's seen one since the tradeday when Oldma got Eyes for me."

"That doesn't mean there aren't any."

"The Offworlder told her it came from a place that they can't go to anymore."

"Tradetalk!" Kep snorted.

"Maybe. But I've never seen another in a score of years." Suddenly, he felt his weight shift. The wagon seemed to turn, then stop.

"Doze found us a campsite," Kep told him. "I guess we'll be tied

down and ready to start trading by early afternoon."

Hazlim remained silent. His brother elbowed his ribs gently.

"You can see *something*, can't you?"

"Yes." Kep knew that, of course, from the pranks that he and the others had played when they were all younger. Stealing Eyes and putting it in a sack had been a favorite sport.

"All right. You'll stay by me the whole time," his brother said. "I'll be your Eyes. If I stand right next to you that ought to help, don't you think?"

Hazlim nodded. Perhaps he could learn to concentrate on the images from Kep and exclude the others. That would reduce the confusion. But the world would still appear bleak . . . devoid even of the colors that the others saw. As for the self-colors . . . he would have to forget those for now.

The wagons rumbled and turned again. Hazlim had glimpses of bare ground and of trampled patches of weeds. The dust lingered about his nostrils and forced him to sneeze. Here, evidently, was where they would be camped for the ten days of trade. He sat, feeling helpless, waiting for his number two to roll into its parked position next to number one. Kep suddenly moved away from him. "Going to help with the Warewagon," he muttered. "I'll be back for you."

"Wait," said Hazlim. But there was no stopping his brother. He felt the wagon shake as Kep climbed down. He heard number two halt; number three rattled up beside it. Hazlim could not carry out his duties of helping to set camp, so he remained on the wagon's platform while the others dismounted. Nobody spoke to him. There was a confusion of voices and *rampad* grunts all around him; he could sort out no clear visual image.

At last Oldma came, as he knew she would do. Before she spoke, he recognized her from the sweet scent of the leaves that she rubbed on her leathery hands. "This loss, Hazlim," she said roughly, "may hurt us more than you can guess. We must obtain a pair of *rampad* this year. And who amongst us is expert at judging the sturdiness of *rampad*?"

Hazlim's view through her eyes was not well-focused. Nonetheless, he recognized his downcast self, his thin, muscular figure, seated on the wagon bench.

"And what do you say to explain your carelessness? You're too old to be thrashed, though I would find satisfaction in doing it."

He felt again the loosening of the talons after he had tumbled from his seat. "I can say nothing, Oldma."

"You will stand with me at the trading nonetheless. You have

other senses, Hazlim. If you cannot see it, then perhaps you can smell the color of deceitfulness." She did not wait for a reply. Hazlim was again alone.

Kep, standing beside two female cousins, watched while the number-four wagon was brought to a halt apart from the others. The Warewagon looked grimy after the five-day journey, but he was already holding a bucket and brush. He began applying these to the mud on the wheel spokes. He worked quickly and allowed himself no time for introspection. Yet the image of Hazlim without his creature would not leave him.

"Your brother has lost the center of his life." Kep looked up from his work into the glistening eyes of his cousin Lodana. "But you concern yourself with muddy spokes."

Kep's vigor slackened as he made a final pass at the wheel. He slid the brush into the darkened water of the bucket, then rose. "Do not think so poorly of me. The trading must be done. The wagon must be fresh."

"Hazlim will not be part of it. And what else does he have?" She twisted her hands within the pockets of her breeches.

"He has a way of seeing. It is not the same, of course, but it may suffice."

She stared at Kep's feet. "I have seen him find his way without the animal. He is little better off than I am in the dark. And now he will not even find a wife to aid him."

"He is too young to marry." Kep's mouth fell open as the groaning of the wagon suddenly sounded again in his ears. He felt the creature squirming beneath his hands. "Come," he said, unwilling to recall the rest. "I'll need help with the banner."

Another cousin stood nearby holding the woven cloth. She approached at his request. Kep upturned his bucket at the edge of the Warewagon, then took one end of the striped banner. Standing on the bucket, he was able to reach a high ring on the outside of the cabin wall. Soon the diagonal green-and-brown Mone stripes were spread across the cabin's side.

Lodana did not smile at the sight of the stripes. Kep looked at the downcast eyes of the other young cousins who stood beside the wagon. "I will take care of my brother," he said, addressing all of them. "I know how to help him." Their expressions did not change.

"The Warewagon is moving out. Let's join it." Hazlim heard Kep's voice, then felt his hand. Kep guided him to the ground, began to

lead him across the field. Walking, a task that Hazlim had long ago mastered with the help of Eyes, now became a chore. His body was in the wrong place in relation to his point-of-view. There was no direct connection between his movements and what he saw. Awkwardly clutching Kep's arm, he made his way towards the decorated Warewagon. He stumbled at its ladder's base, then found the hand-holds. "Grain swaps first," Kep said as Hazlim eased into the interior of the cabin. The rich odors of the furs and meat nearly made him gasp. He felt for an airhole and lowered his face to the opening.

The Warewagon pulled out of the campsite and began its halting but brief journey to the grainswap area. The images from Kep's eyes remained dark and featureless despite the shafts of sunlight that penetrated the airholes and viewholes. For a few moments the wagon stopped and the shrill sound of Uncle Doze's voice could be heard arguing with one of the functionaries. Then, again, there was motion.

As soon as the wagon halted, Hazlim was pulled towards the door. Following Kep down the ladder, he was assaulted by a new confusion of images. He tried to focus on Kep's view, which he recognized as the strongest of those he was receiving. He saw the Warewagon of the graintraders, which was decorated with a patterned network of ropes. In front of it, their Oldma chewed on a stub of *pask* root as she stood looking over the assembling Mone Clan.

"These folks don't look very friendly," Kep whispered, as they moved towards the platform end of the graintraders' wagon. Hazlim felt awkward, but he was beginning to learn to use Kep's view. Above them, the rough sacks of *talp* and *moro* lay open for inspection. "We might as well be first," Kep said.

They crossed the clear space. Hazlim followed Kep up the three-runger to the platform and then felt his way between the high sacks. The stubble of the cloth scratched his skin wherever he touched it. Kep dipped his hand deep into one sack, brought up a handful of *moro*. He dropped a few of the pointed kernels into Hazlim's hand. "Small," Kep muttered. "And with maybe a hint of that grey rot we've been hearing about."

Hazlim held the cool grains limply for a few moments, then placed one between his teeth. Its core seemed firm enough, but the flavor was somewhat musty. He was no expert. Uncle Doze would detect, perhaps, if the contents were tainted.

"I don't know what they've got packed on the bottom," Kep said quietly. "Could be pebbles from the looks of these folks. I can't dig down far enough to tell."

They sampled from a few other sacks, with equally inconclusive results. Then Kep mumbled something about the Elders arriving, so the two climbed back down to the dirt floor of the tradering. Nothing further would happen until the Elders made their examination. Kep's attention, and hence Hazlim's, wandered until it found a group of grainer girls standing idly by the corner of their wagon. "They seem well-enough fed," Kep confided. "But not very warm. I wonder if they're friendly. . . ?"

Hazlim could discern for himself how thin were the pelts that formed the leggings of the women. Kep's gaze lingered for some time on one young lady.

Her face had high cheekbones and a thin nose. She offered half a smile as they approached. "What's wrong with your kinsman?" she asked Kep.

"Brother. And nothing's wrong with him."

"Except for his eyes."

"He can-see."

The two others with her stared at Hazlim curiously. He was used to being stared at. With Eyes on his shoulder, he had been ever an object of wonder; now, stumbling, he was an object of pity.

"I like what you're wearing." The girl who had spoken addressed Kep. "The jacket is nicely sewn. If I had the fine furs, I could do work like that."

Hazlim could see that all three of the girls were interested only in Kep. He broke away and tried to walk back towards the platform end of the wagon. "Clumsy!" said an unfamiliar voice as he bumped someone. Without Kep beside him he was forced to rely on what images he could pick up from the others. Trying to direct his movements on the basis of such haphazard views of himself was nearly impossible. He staggered to a stop.

"Hazlim, I want you!" Oldma's voice came from behind. She grasped him firmly, almost painfully, at the elbow and took him with her to the rank of Elders that now stood face-to-face with their grainer counterparts.

Through Oldma's vision he watched the blurry grainer Oldma. "What is this young man doing in the first rank?" she asked sharply. Hazlim winced, as he had always done when his presence at trading was questioned. Had the other Clans known he could see the self-colors, they would not willingly have traded with Mone. But now his talent . . .

"He is with me," answered Oldma. She placed a hand roughly on Hazlim's shoulder; the leaf scent rose about him. "If it comforts you,

you may brace yourself on a young man of your own Clan."

The other Oldma laughed.

"Then let us begin. We require eight of *moro*, ten of *talp*. But your *moro* is tainted and your *talp* seeds are as stale as last year's crops. We shall eat poorly this winter if we trade with your Clan."

The other Oldma chewed on her root for a moment. Hazlim, now using several pairs of eyes, saw superimposed her front, her profile, and the rear-view of her grey high-piled locks. But the images were colorless . . . useless. He could find no reading of her self. "Our *moro* is clean," she said. "As for the *talp*, I supervised the harvesting and the cleaning myself. You will find none fresher."

"Can you tell me *nothing*?" Oldma whispered into Hazlim's ear. "Before we display our offer can you not find a judgment of her truth?"

Hazlim's throat felt constricted. He concentrated on the colorless grainer Oldma as her jaws worked the root. "No, I cannot." The words came out as a half-cry. Then his legs took over without waiting for a conscious decision. He bounced off some of the watchers in the rear ranks of his Clan, somehow cleared the entrance gate to the tradering, and became immersed in the crowds.

The first few collisions helped clear his head. As he rose from the dust, he understood that he'd been far better off with Kep beside him. Now he would have to find someone else to use as a guide. But he would have to move quickly. At any moment, one of his clanfolk might come after him.

He cast about for someone in whose vision his own figure began to grow. Here was his chance. He watched his slender body turn its back to the viewer and begin to walk forward. If he could keep this unseen person behind him, he would have the eyes he needed to avoid obstacles and to progress along the paths. But his slow gait was soon overtaken. The "guide" brushed past him and he was confused again.

Involuntarily, Hazlim's hand rose to his shoulder. But Eyes's head was not there. The pain of the realization nearly brought tears again. He stopped and sorted through the images in search of another guide.

Soon he began to walk again, this time more quickly than before. He found himself traveling in a stream of traffic that was loosely segregated into two opposite flows. The images of those moving towards him grew stronger as each sender approached; often he nearly lost the image of the guide behind him. But he held onto the guide's view and advanced into the livestock area.

Here the ripe droppings of the *rampad* perfused the air. The guide stopped; his gaze left Hazlim's back to linger on a pair of oddly dressed individuals who were standing at the edge of a tradering. Despite the lack of color in his vision, Hazlim recognized at once the padded, smooth-skinned clothing. The two wore tight head coverings that left only their hairless faces exposed. There was no question as to their offworld origin.

Hazlim heard the guide, who was now just behind him, utter an epithet in the direction of the visitors. Those opinions did not interest him, however. He stopped walking, reached for the rough crossbar of the nearest tradering fence, and tried to find a new pair of eyes.

An Offworlder was looking straight at him. Perhaps this was the one he had been hoping to find. Hazlim had never addressed such a person, and fumbled for the correct salutation. *Honorable one?* No, too formal. That term was reserved for the Elders on ceremonial occasions. *Distinguished one?* Perhaps. He moved along the rail fence in the direction of the strangers.

"Distinguished one, I come to you in search of information." Hazlim could see himself, but not the Offworlder's reaction to his words.

There was a pause, followed by a voice that came from a place that sounded too close to the ground. "Please be informed that I am here as a spectator," said the thin reply, with intonations resembling those of a Southern trader. "Except for matters concerning my personal safety, I prefer not to be engaged in conversation."

Hazlim's face burned as the Offworlder's words recirculated in his mind. "Distinguished one," he said, turning his head in the hopes that he would be addressing a different member of the group. "Are you also one who wishes to remain aloof?"

"Please be informed . . ." said an identical voice, only this time from farther away, "that I am here as a spectator. Except for matters concerning my personal safety . . ."

Hazlim stumbled away, as the response droned to a halt. He could imagine, had he still his Eyes, just what self-colors these Offworlders would be showing. Not pretty . . . not pretty at all.

Kep dropped the last sack of *moro* beside the others that lay along the fore wall of the Warewagon's cabin. His tongue was dry from the dust and chaff, but he did not stop at the ale barrel on his way back outside. The afternoon was wearing on; the grain swaps were done. Yet Oldma had said nothing about Hazlim.

As he emerged into daylight, he saw that the Elders were already in their seats on the wagon's platform. "Uncle," Kep called to one

who remained on the ground. Uncle Doze, a gaunt man whose remaining circle of hair was more grey than black, was intent on checking the reins of the *rampad*. Kep took several long strides, and reached Doze just as the Elder grasped the nosering of the nearest of the pair of beasts. Doze pulled at the two thongs that passed through opposite sides of the collar that encircled the animal's stout neck. "There was a snag on number two," he said quietly, without looking at Kep. "The thong was frayed and caught on a splinter in the collar. That is why we had the accident."

Kep kicked the flat front of his boot at the ground as Doze calmly continued to test the smooth functioning of the reins. "Hazlim has run off and Oldma says nothing," he complained.

"You are a jumpy fellow, Kep. I have told you many times to tame your impatience."

"Oldma has no use for him now. I know how she thinks. Without his animal he is just a stomach to be filled."

Doze rubbed the back of his hand affectionately across the snub-nose of the black animal. He seemed about to turn to its mate, but his gaze passed over the beasts' heads towards the traderings that lay strung out before him. "If another of those creatures can be found," he said, "then Oldma will get one for Hazlim. If not . . ."

"It is not a matter for Oldma to settle," Kep said quietly.

Doze ignored his remark, bent to examine the second nosering. He became preoccupied with the reins.

Kep turned towards the inside of the tradering. Three grainer men were passing the last of their newly acquired cured meats in through the doors of their wagon. No Mone clanfolk remained on the ground. Kep began to walk towards the ladder to his own wagon's door, but when he reached it he did not stop.

Hazlim paused and sniffed the air for the scents of the salt-and-spice traders. He had been told that Offworlders frequented the place he was seeking and that these Offworlders were not so aloof as the first pair he had encountered. But where were they? He sorted through the images from the minds of those brushing past him, obtaining clear impressions only of a nearby purveyor's wagon. Hazlim's mouth was dry and his stomach was starting to grumble. The frequent views of the purveyor that he was receiving suggested that others had similar needs.

He fingered the pouch of tradebeads within his breeches. The singsong of the purveyor's chant brought his tongue to his lips. "Large ALE . . . fine ALE . . ." But Hazlim did not wish to delay

his search.

"That is a broken jacket you are wearing, sir," said a voice with Southern undertones. Hazlim scanned for a vision of his accoster but found none. "Why not rid yourself of the garment in exchange for things of value?"

Hazlim's pulse quickened as he speculated on the identity of the speaker. Though he could not see the individual, he was certain that no native, even in tradetalk, would so describe his fine coat. *Shabby*, perhaps, might be the word used by one who coveted the garment. But not *broken*.

He fumbled for a response, while he cast about for views to confirm his guess. Yes, he saw himself for an instant standing before a broad-bodied, sleekly dressed stranger. At last his hopes had been realized. "Perhaps . . ." he said carefully. He had been addressed as "sir." Ought he to use the same term in reply? "Perhaps, sir, you have something that might interest me."

"There is an empty place near here," said the Offworlder. "I am Storekeeper to my acquaintances. And you?"

"Hazlim."

"Then come, Hazlim."

Another glimpse showed him that the Offworlder carried a large shallow box that hung from a handle. Hazlim felt an unaccustomed dampness in his palms as he followed him to a railing that stood apart from the traffic. "I am interested only in animals," he said at once. "I had a furry creature I called Eyes. It sat on my shoulder and showed me the world."

"I contain nothing like that, but you must look anyway." The stranger touched the case; it sprang open.

Through Storekeeper's eyes, Hazlim viewed an assortment of oval and rectangular objects. Some he recognized as the mirrors that a few women possessed. The ones he had seen before had been mere shards, however; these were large perfect pieces. How much, he wondered, might some Oldma trade for one of them? "I need nothing from you but my creature," he insisted. "These things have no value to me."

"You are stoneheaded, Hazlim. You speak of things not possible. Animals! Do you think they easily transport?"

Hazlim murmured: "I do not know."

"If an offworld creature you did have, it was likely someone's pet. I fail to find why such would be traded."

"Perhaps there are others. Amber fur . . . small pointed snout . . ."

"I have not sighted one. But think about what I offer. For your

jacket I will trade you any three of these." He reached for one of the items inside the box. It was more than a mirror. It vibrated in Storekeeper's hand, displayed patterns and voiced sour-toned music. Hazlim did not wait for him to show what else the object could do.

Had Storekeeper spoken honestly about his prospects for finding an animal? Hazlim had no way of knowing. His head was starting to throb and his tongue could barely function.

He gave in to his needs. At a small foodwagon, he bargained with the purveyor for a skewer of roasted meat and vegetables and for a gourdful of ale. While Hazlim stood eating, the vendor banged a skewer against an iron platter while singing his wares. Many glances came Hazlim's way. He could not say whether they were seeking the source of noise or staring at Hazlim's clumsiness with the food. No matter. It was clear that he had much practicing ahead of him before he would master his remaining form of vision.

He finished, and made his ablutions in the bucket provided. Leaving the foodwagon, he followed the scent of roasted *pik* seeds to the site of the spicer traderings. Nearly all the rings he passed were occupied. Here a stocker Clan stood toe-to-toe facing a spicer Clan. . . . There a grainer Clan negotiated a swap. The Offworlders were not present at the conventional trading sites; they conducted their business outside the rings. And none he passed possessed a live animal. Perhaps Storekeeper had spoken truth.

If so, what now might he do? There was no returning bare-shouldered to Mone Clan. He could not face again Oldma's scorn or Kep's solace. He would have to keep searching; there was no other choice.

He began to circulate among the Offworlders. Quite a few of them, he found, were willing to converse with him. They offered stones that danced, and tubes that sang, and flasks that held more water than their size made possible, but no one could supply him with the creature.

At last, after a long afternoon of fruitless searching, Hazlim passed a pair of men standing by a stack of wooden birdcages. These were no Offworlders; from the first's head he observed the thin and weatherbeaten features of the second. Around his neck hung a heavy shawl such as the spinners make for themselves. His boots, however, were livestockers'.

"What can we offer you for that mismatched snetskin jacket?" said the shorter man. This one was attired in the fashion of a trapper, but also wore a shawl.

*Itinerants*, Hazlin thought. *Clanless*. But he did not turn away from them. "I need an offworld animal."

"We have just what you want," the taller one said with assurance. He picked off the topmost cage of the stack. The flimsy tied-twig structure wobbled and creaked in his hands.

"Not a bird," Hazlim protested.

"This is no ordinary bird. See the plumage?" The itinerant reached a long finger into the cage and poked at its ruffled feathers. The bird flapped its wings once and then settled to the bottom of the cage.

"I have seen such birds flying free in the mountains," Hazlim said. "But what is that you have under the cover?"

The short one, with a surprising burst of energy, began to move the topmost cages out of the way. Hazlim discreetly moved upwind of him as he worked. "This, you mean?"

"Yes."

Another creature rustled within the hooded cage. Hazlim's pulse hammered as the itinerant stripped the sackcloth cover from the cage. "Nice, isn't it?"

Hazlim gasped at the new visual field that overlaid the shawl-wearers' views. This was totally unlike what Eyes had shown him. "What is that?"

"Ah! A true import. It gets excited easily. That's why we keep it hooded."

The features of this feathered thing were scarcely discernible because its own visual projection was so much stronger than those of the men. He took the cage in his hands, raised it to shoulder height, to see what kind of view this bird could provide.

It was a far-sighted creature. The nearby objects were blurred slightly, but at a distance of twenty paces Hazlim could pick out the seams on the leather caps of stockers.

"It's expensive," the first itinerant told him. "We'll need more snetskins than you're wearing."

Hazlim was not ready to begin trading. "The bird shows me as little color as you do," he said sadly, not expecting them to understand. The image was strong. Not so bright as Eyes's, but brighter than what Kep projected.

"You'll need a dozen snetskins . . . plus your jacket."

"A dozen?" He continued to hold the cage. The bird moved its head every few moments, so that he had little time to observe any one scene. "This would be better than nothing," he said. "But it is not what I need. My animal had a tapered snout and a spiral tail. It may have come from the same place as this one."

"Then you'd better take it, my friend. We're not getting another shipment for what . . . five?"

"Ten!" the other answered.

"Ten years! I don't think you want to wait that long."

Hazlim shook his head and put down the cage. "I will give fifty snetskins for my Eyes, but none for this. Though it is a fine bird."

"For fifty, I will make one for you," said the short one. The other slapped the first and laughed, and then the two slapped each other and laughed once more. Hazlim stepped away before the bird could tempt him again.

Kep darted across the path, leaping nimbly over a lone woolbearer that was being driven by its herder. The ale-seller, standing beside his cask, did not interrupt his chanting as Kep approached him. The long shadows of the man and his barrel stretched under the tradering fence at his back.

"Have you seen a young hunter . . . one dressed like myself?" Kep spoke between gasps for breath.

The short and muscular ale-seller glanced at Kep's hands. "You are thirsty, perhaps?"

Kep smiled. "If I took refreshment everywhere I've stopped, I would now be asleep in the dust. . . . I have lost my brother."

The ale-seller squinted. "Perhaps you are thirstier than you think."

"This brother would be stumbling."

The man began to chant again. "*Large ALE . . . fine ALE . . .*" His expression of amusement hinted at knowledge.

Kep pulled two waxy tradebeads from his pouch and tossed them onto the top of the cask. The ale-seller opened the spigot and half-filled the gourd cup. "Half a draft for a half-thirsty man," he said. "I saw a hunter not long ago who was walking oddly . . . but not like a drunkard. He was slow. You might catch him if you go in that direction."

Kep took one swallow of the bitter drink, then dropped the cup on top of the barrel. He turned to the path the ale-seller had indicated, deftly picked his way through a small flock of woolbearers. Hazlim was not far away, he told himself, but the cold feeling in his chest did not disperse.

At sunset, feeling close to exhaustion, Hazlim stood slumped against a post of a salt-and-spicer ring. The cool evening air was beginning to reach through his clothing. Where would he spend the night? He could not stay outside; if the night air didn't freeze him, then the itinerants would certainly rob him.

As the light failed, the images were becoming fainter. With Eyes, his night vision had been better than that of others. And even in darkness he had been able to see the self-colors. But now he feared that he would soon lose all his sight. Focusing was becoming increasingly difficult. For a moment, he abandoned his efforts at concentration. The overlaid scenes shifted as he began to slide down to a seat on the stiff ground.

Hazlim wanted to sleep. His head dropped, then came up with a jolt as he realized that he had dozed off for a moment. Then, suddenly, he became fully awake. Unaccountably, his visual images brightened, faded, brightened. He received a faint impression of color.

Startled, he pulled himself up, took a few tentative steps. There was something new here, a different kind of sender, but he was too distant from the origin of the images to say more. A few steps showed him the correct direction. He barely avoided a collision with a team of panting *rampad* as he crossed a lane. The moist breath of the animals lingered as he guided himself by touch along a fence. Then he turned to find a crowd gathered in a clearing between two trade-rings. A voice that he identified as an Offworlder's was speaking, but he could not catch the words.

The colored images were growing in intensity with each step he took towards the crowd. The self-colors were there: he saw faces of dusty grainers that showed patches of wariness as they stared at something to the side. Then the view dropped to a pair of bone-white talons beneath which swung an amber spiraling tail. Eyes!

He pushed forward until his head filled with the scenes projected by the creature. As it turned its attention from place to place, he deduced that it was perched on a fence rail and that its owner was the uncharacteristically grey-garbed Offworlder who held the crowd's attention. Above the stranger, one of the imported flameless lanterns hung from a pole. Its beam lit the entire area.

"Take notice, sons of the Clans," he was saying. "I offer you opportunity for early station. Stay here and you freeze waiting for your time of elevation. Leave planet with me and you return here a person of influence."

"Few Elders view offworld service as elevating," argued someone. "What if I come home with a bucketful of tradebeads and have to go back to cleaning out the stables? What will you tell me then?"

"Wealth brings privilege, sir. Your Elders mislead you unknowingly. Show your bucketful of silver, I urge you, and watch their faces glisten."

"Elders' faces are too crusty to shine!" said another voice. There

was a ripple of laughter from the assembled young men. "You offer us nothing, stranger!" A chorus of responses followed—some agreeing, some disagreeing.

"What exactly is the nature of the work?" asked a shaggy weaver. "You talk, but I haven't got the sense of it yet." Hazlim wished that he could reach out to twist the creature's head. As it was, he got only a momentary glimpse of the questioner's face and of his rainbow of uncertainty.

"We have planets to tame, sir. We need men who can direct machines and keep them running." As the Offworlder spoke, the color of deceitfulness showed faintly as a pearly iridescence. "And we need men who can think and plan." The color shifted into one of its darker shades. Shadows crossed the Offworlder's face.

"But surely your own people are capable of such work. Why come to us?" The weaver was rightly skeptical, Hazlim thought, and yet . . .

"We become lazy," was the reply. Hazlim saw again the ugly iridescence in the stranger's face. "Our people do not take to the life of a field crew. That is why I offer such a thick bounty." He pointed to a display board covered with tradegoods. Hazlim caught just a glimpse; he did not believe that he had seen such goods for trade before.

"I will go if you give me the animal!" The words tumbled out of Hazlim's mouth. He realized how easily he had dismissed the Offworlder's lack of candidness. He felt two dozen pairs of eyes turned on him.

"Not for trade," the Offworlder answered. "But come ahead and let me show you what I have."

Kep was startled to hear Hazlim's voice. He had been standing at the rear of the crowd studying the animal and its despised owner. Now he attempted to push through towards his brother. A reek of ale and cattle surrounded him as he was buffeted by punches and dark remarks.

"Come sir," said the Offworlder to Hazlim. "As premier recruit, you take extra bounty. And don't forget the payment at the end of service."

"I saw a young man come back old three tradegrounds later," said a gritty voice near Kep. "Made into an old man in just three years. How do you explain that, Offworlder?"

He did not answer at once. There were further shouts.

"That was not of my doing," he replied at last. "My crew gets temporal protection the same as any other Class travelers. If there

should be a failure, I guarantee the rejuvenation. So why do you hesitate to join me?"

Kep saw Hazlim emerge at the front of the crowd. "I want the animal," he said. Kep's own way was blocked by a close-packed group of herders.

The grey-garbed one repeated that the animal was not for trade, then proceeded to ignore Hazlim. He spoke again of the bounties and of the merits of the work.

The crowd closed behind Kep and he found that he could move neither forward nor back. He half-listened while the recruiter attempted to persuade a young livestock to join him. The animal was there; Kep could think of nothing else.

The Offworlder had no success with the stocker. The man examined the tradegoods, then ran out into the night. After repeated attempts, the recruiter could get no one else to come forward. His voice began to crack. "All right, sir," he said at last to Hazlim. "Come ahead and let me look at you."

"The animal . . ."

"The *belldro*. Yes. I am attached to that one but I require men."

Hazlim staggered towards the Offworlder. Kep felt a deepening chill in his ribcage as his brother's awkward steps took him towards the recruiter.

"Have you a deformity, sir?" The Offworlder suddenly seemed disappointed. "I need good physical specimens."

"Tradetalk!" interjected a high-pitched voice.

The grey-garbed one ignited a thumb-sized flameless torch and brought it close to Hazlim's eyes.

"Your creature is sickly!" shouted someone else, as if taking Hazlim's voice in pre-trade banter. But Kep knew that the Offworlder's comment was more than tradetalk.

"I cannot use you. No. Do step back."

"But . . ."

"No!"

Someone shouted: "Take him! Take him!" Others took up the cry.

"He wants to go. Take him!" the shouts continued.

The Offworlder, clearly concerned, stepped closer to his *belldro*. Kep saw its eyes scan the crowd, saw its mouth open as if uttering cries. He suspected that there passed from the animal to the man some knowledge regarding the mood of the audience. He had not known anyone other than Hazlim who could receive images from Eyes, but it was possible that the animal could communicate its perceptions in some other way. The Offworlder picked up the crea-

ture, then quickly began to gather his belongings.

Expecting the animal to vanish, Kep hesitated only for a moment. He had already seen more Offworlders in that one day than he wished to see in a lifetime. He cared nothing for the Clan's needs. But for his brother . . .

"I will go," Kep shouted. "I am ready to join up. Give *him* the animal and I will enter your service." The chanting quieted, then stopped. Suddenly the crowd made way for him. He paid no heed to the faces that followed him as he passed to the front. There he saw the Offworlder turn from his packing. "Here is your recruit," Kep said. "Here is your fine specimen of a man."

The Offworlder examined him quickly. "You will suffice," he said. He put his hand on Kep's shoulder and raised his voice. "Do you see, sirs? I have my premier recruit . . . a fine gentleman. I am not too proud to admit it."

The audience murmured as the Offworlder spoke. But Hazlim's tongue felt dead in his mouth. He had seen the nature of this grey-garbed person. For himself, he did not care about the consequences of joining him. Without the animal, he cared little for his life. But his brother's case was far different; he had potential to become an Elder of the Clan.

"We must legally bind you to the contract of service," said the Offworlder to Kep. He produced from a seam in his clothing a perforated black disk that fit into the palm of his hand. "Do you know the meaning to be voicebound?"

Kep indicated a negation.

Hazlim cleared his throat. He didn't know quite what he would say.

"It is this," continued the Offworlder. "I speak the conditions and then you speak your name and Clan . . ."

"Kep, I must tell you something." Hazlim pulled his brother backwards and brought his lips to his ear.

"Hazlim. . . It must be this way."

"Do not do this for me, Kep. I have seen what lies this Offworlder dispenses. His spectrum would make a cutthroat's look pretty."

"I am strong enough for any service. Oldma needs you and your Eyes. And what am I good for?"

"You never had patience." Hazlim ignored the Offworlder's flickering patterns. "The Elders will recognize you soon. But if you go with this stranger you may return aged . . . if you return at all. Look at me. I am learning to get along without Eyes. I reached this place on my own."

"I never thought you would value me above your creature and your talent," Kep said softly. "We have been angry with each other often and for poor reasons. Let there be no more childishness." Kep embraced him, touching chins in the gesture of leavetaking. "The discussion is ended."

Hazlim could not release the embrace. Surely there were words to dissuade Kep from his folly. But he knew from Kep's face that there were none. "Then farewell," he whispered at last. "I'll see you three tradegrounds hence. I am certain you will be here."

"Are you prepared, sir?" said the Offworlder, bringing the black disk close to Kep's mouth. "Do you agree to three point six annum service in Primary Development Corps at the remuneration rate of . . ."

Kep paid scant attention to what the recruiter said. He spoke his agreement into the disk and the man seemed satisfied. What was next? There were a few cousins he cared about and there was Uncle Doze. He guessed that he would not bid farewell to them.

"We depart," said an unfamiliar voice. A second Offworlder, garbed like the first, stepped towards Kep. "We have stationed a vehicle not far from here," the smooth-faced man continued. "You will be off-planet before sunrise."

The coldness inside Kep's chest was gone, replaced now by a damp coating of perspiration on his belly. He glanced back just as the recruiter placed the *belldro* on Hazlim's shoulder.

"It is done," Kep said quietly. Hazlim had regained what a moment of folly had snatched away. And Kep's life with Mone Clan was behind him. His heartbeat quickened as he began to follow the second Offworlder.

Hazlim heard the creature peep its concern over its change in master. He ruffled its underfur, ran his finger down its pointed snout to the thin, rough tongue that lapped for salt on his skin. From his breeches he took one of the nuts that the first Eyes had favored. The animal, holding the nut between its paws, began to settle onto its new perch.

"Who will be next, sons of the Clans?" The stranger, restored to his former level of self-confidence, began again to harangue the crowd. Hazlim, no longer an object of attention, drifted to the side and away from the recruiter's audience.

Eyes had been restored but Kep was gone. The fact made the hairs on his arms bristle under their fur coverings. Such a swap was impossible, yet he had been helpless to prevent it. Now he would return to Mone Clan. He did not relish facing Oldma, but he would

go to explain Kep's departure. What would happen afterwards, he could not predict.

On the poles of the traderings, the torches already had been lit. With his Eyes in place, Hazlim moved easily through the evening's throngs. And a thought developed as he went. His visual abilities were valuable, more so than he had realized. He must find a better use for them than any Oldma had suggested. He promised himself, he would do so for Kep's sake. The notion cheered him a bit.

He touched his Eyes protectively, fingered the talons where they dug into the thick pelt of his jacket. *Yours was a trade I'd not choose on my own*, he thought. *But I will honor its obligation.* The faces of the passing stockers, as they glanced at Hazlim and his *belldro*, were brilliant with curiosity.

## SECOND SOLUTION TO SCRAMBLED HEADS ON LANGWIDERE (from page 67)

The limit is  $1 - (1/e)$ , where  $e$  is the irrational base of natural logarithms. The value of  $e$  is  $2.718281828\ldots$ , which gives the fraction a value of  $.63212055866\ldots$ , or slightly less than  $2/3$ . This can be modeled with playing cards as follows.

One person shuffles a packet of  $n$  cards while someone else shuffles a duplicate packet consisting of the same  $n$  cards. They deal their cards one at a time in synchronization. What is the probability that at least one pair of simultaneously dealt cards will be identical? If the packet contains three or more cards, the probability is close to  $2/3$ .

The probability for all packets of five or more cards is  $.63 +$ . Thus if a self-styled psychic calls out any sequence of the 52 playing cards, while a deck is being dealt in another room, at least one call of a card will be correct in about two out of every three repetitions of the test.

Now see if you can answer this simple question. After Dot, Trot, and Zot got their randomized checks from the clerk, what is the probability that exactly two of the ladies got her correct head check? Turn to page 110 for the surprising answer.

# ON THE YEARS WITHOUT A SUMMER

by John Boardman

art: Alex Schomburg



*Prof. Boardman teaches physics at a college in Brooklyn, NY, but seems equally well versed in history.*

If you ask most reasonably well-read people what has been the most violent volcanic eruption in historical times, the reply would probably be either that of Vesuvius on 24 August 79 [not '79], or that of Krakatoa on 27 August 1883. These, however, were simply the best-publicized eruptions of recorded history. Vesuvius is located near one of the principal cities of a great empire whose culture was directly ancestral to our own; and we have an on-the-spot report from Pliny the Younger including an obituary for his uncle, who got a little too close to the fumes. And Krakatoa erupted in the age of the telegraph and the steamship, and could be heard over an area equal to that of the coterminous United States.

However, Vesuvius' most famous eruption was comparable merely to the current turmoil of Mt. St. Helens; in fact, the two eruptions

have been remarkably similar in kind and vigor. Both have involved heavy ash-falls and mud flows, and relatively little outpouring of lava. Krakatoa was far more vigorous than either, but it does not hold the record for violence. Aside from the legendary eruption of Thera, sometime around 1470 B.C. in the Aegean, the most violent volcanic eruption of historic times was the little-known explosion of Tambora, on the island Sumbawa east of Java, on 11-12 April 1815. This eruption is technically known as the "cataclysmic" type, and it blew no less than 140 cubic kilometers of rock into the air, taking 1200 meters off the height of the mountain and leaving a crater eleven kilometers wide. Owing to the Napoleonic wars, that region was then under the rule of a British military governor, the famous Sir Stamford Raffles, who later founded Singapore. Raffles estimated that the volume of matter blown into the air was the equivalent of three Mont Blancs.

Tambora is the most destructive volcano ever recorded. The dust darkened the sky for three days over a region more than 300 kilometers in radius. The immediate death toll, in that heavily populated part of the world, was over 10,000 people; and since their fields were covered with ashes another 70,000 or 80,000 starved to death.

That was only the local effect. Sixty-eight years later, Krakatoa at the other end of Java was to put only 18 cubic kilometers of dust into the air, and that had a noticeable effect on the weather. The entire world was affected by the explosion of Tambora. The dust blocked off sunlight, markedly lowering temperatures all over the planet. The cool, damp year of 1816 was called "the year without a summer." Not having the atomic bomb to blame the weather on, people then believed that the unfavorable change of climate had been caused by all the cannon fired at Waterloo the previous year. But even in our own time, the energies which humanity is capable of releasing are small in amount and feeble in effect next to those which result from natural processes.

The bad weather produced by Tambora had literary fallout as well. Switzerland has always been considered a pleasant summer resort by the English, but on an August evening in 1816 five English exiles were forced to sit around a fire, telling stories, because the weather was too inclement for anything else. These exiles, who had left debts, spouses, or both in England, were George Gordon Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, two of Byron's lovers (one of each sex), and a young lady named Mary Godwin who had borne Shelley one child and was pregnant with another, though Shelley had a wife back in England. Curiously, neither Byron's nor Shelley's tale was

considered worthy to survive; but John Polidori told the first vampire story in English literature; and the 18-year-old Mary told a horrifying tale of a mad scientist who created a hulking monster out of parts of human cadavers. She later re-wrote it as the classic novel *Frankenstein*; and it was published under her name as Mary Shelley, for Shelley married her the following winter after his abandoned wife found herself pregnant by another man and killed herself.

Tambora was not the first volcano perceived to have had an effect on the weather. During the summer of 1783 there were a number of eruptions of the Icelandic volcano Laki. During these, 80 cubic kilometers of lava flowed out of the interior of the Earth, the greatest lava outflow in historic times. Clouds of dust spread to Britain and Norway, to an estimated total of 0.3 cubic kilometers—a mere fraction of Krakatoa's output, though Laki's eruption is estimated to have released as much energy as Tambora's. Still, the violence and the ashfall killed an estimated 9,000 of Iceland's 50,000 people; and over a third of the country's farm animals starved to death.

At the time of Laki's eruption, Benjamin Franklin was 77 years old, and deeply involved at his duties as American Ambassador in Paris while peace was being concluded with Great Britain. But his universally inquiring mind did not miss the significance of Laki's eruption. He noted a "constant fog over all Europe and parts of North America during the summer of 1783" and remarked that "perhaps the winter of 1783–84 was more severe than any that had happened for many years." Franklin was probably ignorant of the fact that Asama Yama in Japan had also erupted in 1783, contributing still more dust to the atmosphere. Still, this is the first recorded comment on a connection between major volcanic eruptions and subsequent cold weather. A century later, effects on the weather from Krakatoa's eruption were also noted. In the year following the eruption, sunlight was down by 13 percent.

But it is not only in prosaic historical accounts of meteorology that the expression "year without a summer" occurs. In the first half of the 13th century the Icelandic scholar, poet, and politician Snorri Sturlason collected the lore of his pagan ancestors into a work usually called *The Younger Edda*, or *The Prose Edda*. (It is "younger" by comparison with an earlier poetic collection of tales of the old gods and heroes, which Snorri frequently quoted.) The Old Norse religion was certainly one of the most pessimistic ever devised by human ingenuity. Like the Christians who supplanted them, the worshippers of Odin and Thor believed that at the end of time there would be a climactic last battle between the forces of Good and the

forces of Evil. However, they believed that this battle, Ragnarök, would be lost by the forces of Good.

According to the legend quoted by Snorri, "First will come the winter called Fimbulvetr. Snow will drive from all quarters, there will be hard frosts and biting winds; the sun will be no use. There will be three such winters on end with no summer between . . . the wolf will swallow the Sun and that will seem a great disaster to men. Then another wolf will seize the Moon and that one too will do great harm. The stars will disappear from heaven. Then this will come to pass, the whole surface of the Earth and the mountains will tremble so that trees will be uprooted from the ground, mountains will crash down, and all fetters and bonds will be snapped and severed." (Trans. Jean I. Young)

These stories originated in Scandinavia before the Norse settlement of Iceland, which began in the latter part of the 9th century. They seem to describe the effects of a volcanic eruption comparable to that of Tambora, or even worse. Yet there are no volcanoes in Scandinavia. It is tempting to suppose that, some time before the settlement of Iceland, a very violent volcanic eruption there darkened the northern skies with so much dust that the end of the world was thought imminent. And the "loss" of a summer would affect the northern regions much more severely than others, creating a disaster that would linger in legend for centuries. Dust from Icelandic volcanoes is certainly capable of reaching Scandinavia. When Hekla erupted on 29 March 1947, ash fell as far east as Helsinki, 3000 kilometers away.

One possible candidate is an eruption of Eldgja's Fissure in 950. This eruption was more violent than the 1783 eruption of Laki, and released nearly as much lava, but the damage in human terms was much less since Iceland was only thinly settled at the time. But the geological record in Iceland will have to be searched for evidences of eruptions comparable to Tambora that might have taken place in the millennium preceding settlement. The fall of the western Roman Empire is said to have been aided by hard freezes that enabled barbarians to cross the Rhine and the Danube; this may have been the Fimbulvetr cited by Snorri.

The Norse are not the only northern people who worked the apparent effects of a major volcanic eruption into their legends. *The Kalevala*, the national epic of Finland, describes such an effect at a crucial point in the running warfare between Kalevala ("Land of Heroes") and Pohjola ("North Land"). Pohjola is always described as lying to the north of Kalevala; and the land and its people are

called dirty, uncouth, and poverty-stricken. Yet other passages belie these epithets. Louhi, the Mistress of Pohjola, is a proud and wealthy matriarch—so much a matriarch, in fact, that her husband and daughters are not identified with personal names, but simply called "Master of Pohjola" and "Daughters of Pohjola". A sumptuous wedding feast is set when the Finnish master-smith Ilmarinen goes to Pohjola to marry Louhi's eldest daughter.

To win his bride, Ilmarinen had to forge for Louhi a magic box called the Sampo, out of various unlikely materials including the milk of a barren cow and the tip of a swan's wing. The Sampo produces a constant flow of grain, salt, and coins; enough to use, store, and trade. It is clearly a symbol of the prosperity of North Land before the disaster related in *The Kalevala*.

But soon his wife dies, and after trying an unsatisfactory robot wife, Ilmarinen sets out to woo another Daughter of Pohjola. He is rejected, and so he and his friend, the bard Väinämöinen, decide to raid Pohjola and steal the Sampo. (Väinämöinen, the hero of the epic, had originally been asked by Louhi to make the Sampo, but confessed himself unable. This might be an allegory of the fact that prosperity is a product of the crafts, not the arts.) They pick up a third companion, the unstable and unreliable Lemminkainen, and get away with the Sampo when Väinämöinen's singing puts all the Pohjolans to sleep.

Once awakened, Louhi puts all her sorcerous powers to the task of revenge.

Then the Maid of Clouds, Mist-Maiden  
From the lake a cloud breathed upward,  
Through the lake the cloud she scattered,  
And detained old Väinämöinen,  
And for three whole nights she kept him  
Out upon the lake's blue surface,  
And he could not move beyond it. . . . (Trans. W. F. Kirby)

Three-day fogs are not unknown in northern waters, but this recalls the darkening of the sky after Tambora's eruption.

Väinämöinen cuts through the fog with his sword, whereupon Louhi calls up a greater terror. A monster called "Iku-Turso, son of Äijö" rises out of the water next to the heroes' boat. But Väinämöinen casts a spell, and Iku-Turso sinks into the water, never to be seen again.

Icelanders are quite familiar with this phenomenon. Temporary

islands sometimes rise from the sea bottom following volcanic eruptions. Subsidence or wave erosion soon destroys most of these temporary islands. "Iku" means "Ancient," and "Aijö" means "the Old One"—both sobriquets of the Devil. "Turso" is not a Finnish word, but is Norse for "Giant". The episode of Iku-Turso does not appear in all texts of *The Kalevala*. It might have originated from a Finn who wandered out to Iceland and saw one of those temporary islands, or who picked up the story from a Norseman.

After disposing of the water-giant, Väinämöinen sends Lemminkainen aloft to see what else Louhi is pursuing them with. He responds, in the meter which Longfellow lifted for his *Hiawatha*:

Dark behind is the horizon  
Rises north a cloud, a small one,  
Hangs a single cloud to north-west.

Upon further investigation, the apparent cloud becomes an island, and then a ship full of men. There is a terrific battle, during which the Sampo is destroyed. Then follows a pestilence, which of course is blamed on Louhi's vengeance. Starving beasts raid Kälevala's herds, and the Sun and the Moon are charmed out of the sky. A great area is burned by a forest fire. Finally Väinämöinen makes another expedition to Pohjola, releases the Sun and Moon from Louhi's captivity, and the epic ends except for a tacked-on chapter predicting the conversion of Finland to Christianity.

Obviously, some catastrophe, vaguely recalled in Norse and Finnish legend, struck the northern lands at a time anterior to the dawn of written history. Once prosperous, they were rendered barren. Louhi's retreat says as much:

Of the Sampo she brought homeward,  
Nothing but a little fragment,  
By her nameless finger carried,  
But a fragment of the cover,  
Which to Sariola she carried:  
Hence the poverty of Pohja,  
And the starving life of Lapland.

A hypothetical pre-settlement eruption in Iceland might be blamed for all this. But south in the Aegean is another volcano, the famous Thera, sometimes known by the more modern name Santorini. Sometime early in the 15th century B.C., Thera exploded in

an eruption possibly more violent than even Laki or Tambora. The island was blown to pieces by this cataclysm; and the ashfall and tidal wave destroyed the Minoan civilization on Crete, about 150 kilometers to the south.

*The Younger Edda* has something to say about this too. For the Norse Pagans, the south was Muspellheim, home of the Fire Giants under their King Surt. At the conclusion of the battle of Ragnarök, "Surt will fling fire over the earth and burn up the whole world." Or, to quote *The Elder Edda*:

Surtr ferr sunnan, medh sviga laevi  
skinn af sverdhi sól val-tiva:  
Grjót-björg gnata, enn gifr hrata;  
trodha Halir hel-veg, enn  
himinn klofnar.

Surt from the south comes  
with spoiler-of-twigs  
blazing his sword  
sun of the mighty:  
mountains will crash down,  
troll-women stumble.  
men will tread Hell-way,  
heavens are cloven.

But the time lapse is too long for Thera to be a plausible source of the legend. The ancestors of the present-day Scandinavians apparently did not come into their lands until the first century B.C. Snorri Sturlason gives an elaborate genealogy tracing the Norsemen back to people who fled the destruction of Troy, but half the peoples of Europe have such legends, and the story is no more plausible from him than it was from Publius Vergilius Maro or Geoffrey of Monmouth. Oral traditions lasting over two thousand years, and wandering from the Aegean to Iceland, are a bit too much to expect us to believe.

While our current concern with vulcanism makes it easy to find volcanic explanations for legendary catastrophes, these ideas can only be speculations. Heavy fogs, a common feature in the northern countries, can darken the sky for long periods of time; so can thermal inversions ("dark days"), particularly when accompanied by large forest fires.

Still, there is a common theme that some ancient catastrophe

worsened the climate and the living conditions of the northern countries in the legendary past, and that it will return in yet more severe form at the end of the world. If this catastrophe was not certainly caused by a great volcanic eruption, somewhere in the world, the information that has come down to us is certainly consistent with such an explanation.



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## REGARDING A WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT THAT ASKED:

If You Were Stranded on the Ice in the Middle  
of a Frozen Lake, How Would You Get Off Sans  
Either Friction or Resistance?

Well, I've written lots of science fiction,  
But sans resistance *and/or* friction?  
Well, gee! ice wouldn't be on water,  
And there would be no son or daughter  
To sit upon the ice because  
Each would, in turn, defy the laws  
Of plain molecular existence:  
The Laws of . . . Friction and Resistance!  
Now, if you've qualified the query  
With some hypothesis or theory  
Based on the unknown factors of  
Another planet, well, then, luv,  
The answer thus, of course, must be  
Like qualified. Now let me see . . .  
On Planet X (if I were there),  
I'd simply be a gust of air  
(Providing X had air, that is;  
I s'pose it does, but that's its biz.)  
Which would, of course, enable me  
To blow myself from X to Z.  
And once on Z, I'd float to Y,  
A vapor. (If on Z were I.)  
Of course I wouldn't care to be  
A difrent form on X, Y, Z.  
But neither would it be so nice  
To be me here, stuck on the ice.  
So guess I'd have to visit Quaase,  
Or Raag or Sclez or *some* far place;  
A place where one could, on command  
(A spoken verb, a clap of hand),  
Will laws to cease or to remain.  
But as for this old home terrain,

So long as ice and I reside  
Right here, well then, each must abide  
Earth's laws—not those of Planet Y.  
(Where I am it? And it is I?)  
But thanks to nature and Ike Newton  
( $M = mv$  sure as shootin'),  
And Al's mass-energy equation  
( $E = mc^2$ ), Elation!  
I realize the ice and I  
Are relative; and if I try  
To move myself from it, I can.  
'Cause it's just ice, and *I* am Man.  
The answer to your question then?  
Well, sure as Zen is Zen is Zen,  
With Friction and Resistance gone,  
I should have to rely upon:  
I = anything to date;  
And thus I wouldn't hesitate,  
Like any pious son or daughter,  
To melt the ice. And walk on water.

—S. Scott Matulis



# BON APPETIT

by Craig C. Koscho  
art: Hilary Barta



*Mr. Koscho is 28; he directs the two evening local newscasts for the CBS-TV affiliate in Fresno, California. Mostly (claims he) this involves praying that the film doesn't break and the video tape machines don't jam up. Mr. Koscho enjoys water skiing, loves the Oakland Raiders, and lives with Noah, who is part setter and part Saint Bernard. This story is his first sale.*

Night had fallen for the fourth time since Jerry Stamway had crash-landed his one-man prospector's ship on Anfor. His small fire burned brightly, offering a little protection from the calm, but cold, Anforian night. His ship, *The Good Luck*, lay behind him, its nose buried in the firm sand of the Anforian desert.

The desert stretched in all directions to the horizon where it was surrounded by sharp, jagged mountains. Across this vastness were scattered dried, brittle remnants of an earlier forestal age; some kind of fossilized vegetable material ranging in size from small twigs to huge limbs.

One more day, thought Jerry, and the space tug that answered my SOS will be here to haul me and my ship out of this wasteland.

He tossed another stick of the wood-like material on the fire. The flames sparked and flared, casting strange dancing shadows on the hull of the ship. Jerry looked lovingly at *The Good Luck*. It was going to cost plenty to haul that crate out, but at least it wasn't a total loss.

He turned back to his small camp, which consisted of a couple gallon drums of water and a folding chair.

Across the fire from Jerry sat one of the native life forms of Anfor; a tall, thin, gangly creature with thick, green scales; a slim, pointed head; and a large, pointed beak. It crouched on its haunches, its spindly arms hanging down between two bony knees.

For four nights now it had come out of the dark to sit by the fire and stare at Jerry. It never said anything . . . never did anything. It just sat . . . and watched.

Jerry picked up a small pebble and sent it hurtling out of his small island of firelight and into the night beyond.

"Well, my friend," he said to the creature. "Looks like I'll be leaving you soon. I wish I could say it's been fun, but frankly, it hasn't." The creature remained silent.

Jerry stared at it for a moment. "Gabby devil, aren't ya?"

The creature opened its beak, as it had done all the previous nights, to make a strange squawk. Only this time it was different. This time the creature said: "Would you like to play a game of checkers?"

Jerry froze. "Hunh?" he grunted.

"If by that you mean you would like me to repeat the question, I shall. I said, 'Would you like to play a game of checkers?'"

"You—you spoke," Jerry stammered.

"Obviously, but you have yet to answer my question."

"So how come you never said anything before?"

"One does not learn a language in a day, Mister Stamway, even if one is as intelligent as myself. I had to scan your mind in order to learn more about you and your language, which is why I ask if you'd like to play checkers—I know it's your favorite game."

"Yeah, so, okay . . . let's," he shrugged, "play some checkers."

The creature stood and walked out of the light to return moments later with a box of checkers and a playing board.

Jerry scratched at the scar on his nose and glanced around nervously while the creature set up the game next to the fire.

"Say, where'd you get this?" Jerry indicated the board and checkers.

"My fellows in the colony made it."

"So there are more of you?"

"Yes, a good many."

Jerry moved one of his pieces then arched his eyebrows in anticipation. "Got any food?" he asked. His last had been eaten two days before.

The Anforian cleared his throat, moved one of his pieces and said: "I'm afraid our nutritional requirements are quite different from yours."

"Oh," said Jerry, and he moved another piece.

The Anforian moved another piece and Jerry followed in turn.

"Does that mean I can't eat the same things as you?"

"That was the basic thrust of my statement, yes."

The alien moved a piece and Jerry jumped it. The Anforian then made a double jump.

"Are you concentrating on the game, Mister Stamway?"

"Of course I am," replied Jerry. "What makes you think I'm not?"

"Just a feeling. Remember, I can probe your mind and I assumed that since this is your favorite game, you would be proficient at it."

Jerry narrowed his gaze; was the Anforian sneering? Was it possible to move a beak enough to sneer? "You know, you're awfully uppity for someone sitting by *my* fire."

"I will ignore the fact that you happen to be on *my* planet and inform you that there is more at stake here than a mere game."

Jerry leaned back slightly. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," the creature shifted his weight uneasily. "Your arrival here has been looked upon by my colony as, shall we say, quite providential."

"How's that?"

"Can't you move and converse at the same time, Mister Stamway?"

"Of course I can!" snapped Jerry, moving a checker. The Anforian sighed and jumped it.

"As I was saying," continued the creature. "We have certain nutritional needs, based on minor mineral requirements, which have been lacking in our diet recently, due to the fact that our planet is going through what you might call a geological recession. In short, the planet is dying.

"We're working on some long-term solutions to our problem, but it's going to take time. You, on the other hand, offer a short-term solution that will sustain us enough to continue with our long-term solutions.

"In your terminology, Mister Stamway, you are a godsend. We can get more than our share of mineral requirements from you."

Jerry paled. "Oh my God," he said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're disgusting."

"Mister Stamway, I believe you are totally misinterpreting my statements. I meant—"

"I know *damn* well what you mean!"

"Please calm down," consoled the creature. "No matter what you think, the game is to give you a chance. You certainly have the edge. After all, you've played the game many times before."

"Some edge! With your telepathy you know every move I make in advance!"

"Mister Stamway, you wound me. It is an act of dishonor for my people to even consider such a thing. It would be a sin for me to stoop to such base cheating."

"What if I refuse to play?"

"Then we'll just take what we need."

"Oh."

"The *game*, Mister Stamway."

"Okay, okay," replied Jerry dejectedly. "I guess," he sighed, "I guess I'd better get serious about this."

Jerry moved a checker; and, after thinking for a moment, the Anforian moved a piece. Jerry followed with a double jump. The creature responded with a triple jump.

"Not very good in the clutch, are you, Mister Stamway?"

"Shut your beak!"

The creature's jaw dropped. "What an offensive remark!"

"Well, what do you expect?"

"Mister Stamway, please," said the creature as it moved a checker. "I want to assure you that—king me—you are making the situation

far more grave than it really is."

"That's easy for you to say."

"Not really; you see, my throat isn't constructed for human speech and sometimes it's quite difficult for me to—"

"Stop!" screamed Jerry. "Just be quiet so I can concentrate on the game."

"As you wish."

The game continued on in silence. Occasionally Jerry would throw another stick on the fire to combat the darkness and the cold. The two played on into the night, each concentrating at great length before moving a checker. Their twin shadows twisted and lurched on the curving sides of the ship.

A pale, pink glow was beginning to color the horizon when the creature spoke. "I have three kings to your one, Mister Stamway, and the only move left open to you is into the corner. To come to the point: I believe I have won."

Jerry sighed. "All right, I concede. Just do me a favor and get this over with as soon as possible."

"So be it, Mister Stamway; but I still say you're making this harder on yourself than need be."

They both stood. Jerry, his head lowered in despair, stared at the fire.

"Well, I'll just call my fellows," said the creature, and he walked off into the night.

Moments later Jerry Stamway realized he *had* misinterpreted the Anforian's intentions. He stood and watched in fascinated horror as 500 beaked lizards descended upon his camp . . . and devoured his space ship.

### THIRD SOLUTION TO SCRAMBLED HEADS ON LANGWIDERE (from page 95)

The answer is zero. Did you waste time going over all six permutations of three objects looking for those with just two symbols in the right place? If two ladies got their own checks, the third check has to belong to the third lady. In other words, it is not possible for just two to be correct.

## STAR WEB

Gazing at the Milky Way  
through the canopy of conifers under which I was camped  
it seemed to me (in a poetic sense)  
that the twinkling web of starlight was attached  
to the evergreen needles like a string of blinking bulbs  
trimmed to a yuletide tree.

I mused on this until a gust of wind blustered in  
and the gossamer web of stars,  
which at first appeared to be gently affixed to the needles,  
got downright caught and helplessly entangled!

This worried me some.

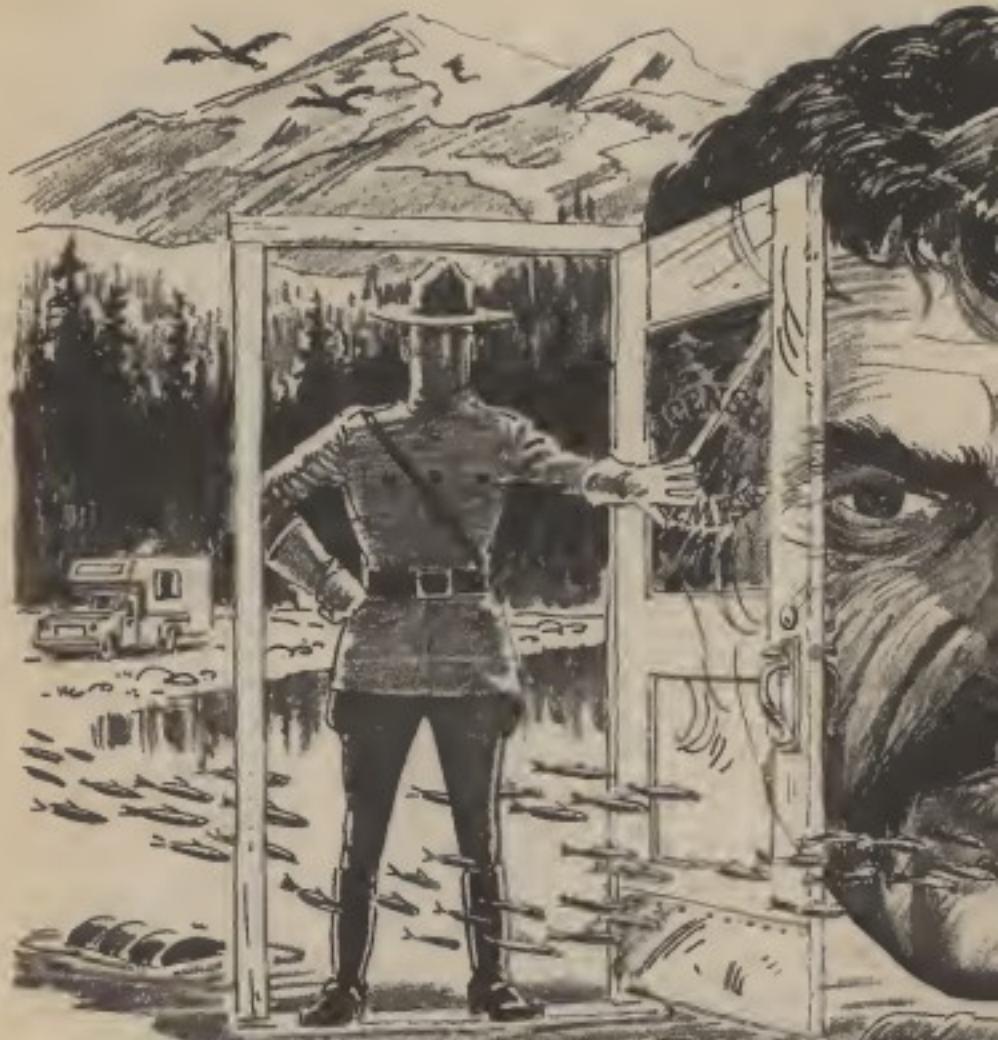
So climbing a nearby tree  
I tried to undo the snarl as best I could.  
Unfortunately being somewhat awkward  
with this delicate sort of thing,  
I grabbed hold of the wrong thread, panicked, lost my footing  
and fell out of my tree  
pulling the whole tangled firmament down  
around my tent into a hopeless knot!

Talk about mishandling a situation!

Frantically I gathered up the knotted mesh  
rolled it into a ball as best I could  
dowsed the glow with a bucket of water from a nearby spring  
and then quietly deposited the stellar evidence  
into the campground dumpster!

Luckily for me dawn was about to break  
when all the stars would vanish anyway.  
However, to be on the safe side,  
I grabbed my gear and high-tailed it out of camp  
on the off chance I would be found out  
by one of the other campers  
who were just then waking.

—Peter Payack



# Written On

by G.C. Edmondson



# the Water

art: Frank Borth

*Mr. Edmondson tells us: "The problem with the Byzantine is that nobody is willing to believe the mad-friend stories are true. Literary license requires that they be neutered up a bit, but every story evolved from an incident in our travels. §§§ A younger, unexpurgated Edmondson wrote the first, "The Misfit," in '59. The Byzantine had a drinking problem even then. The stories have always tried for a Bach effect: story lines with no apparent connection. The only amusement is seeing if the canon finally goes off. §§§ My mad friend is known to West Coast fans and authors. We spent our lives in unusual occupations, and life has been difficult since the CIA gave a bad name to gun running. But just as we are at our wit's end in some anus mundi the Byzantine invariably reappears—no older than a quarter century ago—and with just enough consistency to his stories to . . . §§§ Hell, I don't know. I've seen it, but I don't know if it's a time machine. I'm operating with an Olduvai Mark II information retrieval system that grows increasingly inaccurate. The data are out of control, and I'm not sure of anything."*

It was spring; and prudence dictated a change of scene while my friend's hair, mustache, and some skin grew back. Presumably, this would happen at about the same rate that stability returned to a neighboring country. "I still don't like it," he grumbled.

"You preserve the fine tradition of the Knights Hospitaller and Templar," I consoled. "To say naught of the Company of Jesus."

"Nor let us forget the venerable Order of Assassins," he growled.

This nihilism was unlike my mad friend. "Unsound theology," I murmured.

Instead of getting a rise I got the glare of a man forced to act against his principles. "If only it made some difference," he said.

"What profiteth a man to ask why the helicopter was forty seconds late?"

My mad friend passed a hand through stubbly hair that was coming out blond again, when a shadow fell on our table. We were making reflexive, armpit-scratching gestures when I recognized him. A pair of wives recognized the small dark man with the brilliant smile before I did. They smiled and returned to their discussion of

fake fur and ecological potemkinism.

"How did you find us?" my friend growled.

"Find you?" The Byzantine was speaking a dialect extant until the conquest of Granada, which meant he was either a Sefarad from some enclave in the dismembered Ottoman Empire or else he truly came from an alternate pan-Christian future erased by his own ineptitude with a time machine. "I did not find you," he continued. "However, I rejoice to encounter civilized companionship in this benighted backwater."

"Civilized?" My mad friend glanced wistfully at my Labatt. "So what dost thou here?" he added.

"Keep asking and he'll tell you," I warned. It was too late. The small man with the brilliant smile captured a chair from a vacant table and joined us. A young man in Levis and mackinaw shirt brought glass and bottle. Obviously, the Byzantine was known in these parts.

"I have been trafficking with an alien intelligence," he said.

"Your corpus callosum regenerated and both hemispheres are in touch?" my friend asked.

The Byzantine was impervious to insult. I was still considering the ramifications of *inteligencia ajena*, which could range from what Freud used to call an alienist to as far as military intelligence—if one may be permitted a contradiction in terms.

"The pure." The Byzantine displayed both palms. Lest one think he referred to intelligence, this is an idiom in which truth is implied. But the Byzantine's attitude toward *la mera verdad* had always been subject to procrusteanism.

"Hadn't we best shift base a few degrees?" I suggested.

"But it is spring," the Byzantine protested. "The worst of the cold is over."

"He refers to latitude," my friend growled. "Now that you've blown our cover and, considering that, we're well above the 49th parallel."

"Surely you do not meddle in the affairs of this country!"

"We never do things like that," I said. "We're just avoiding overzealous admirers."

My mad friend looked as if he had a dead fish for a stickpin.

"No one will bother you here," the Byzantine reassured. "I've been trying to attract attention all winter."

My friend and I exchanged alarmed glances. We were rising when the door opened and a Mountie entered. There was a hush in the licensed premises which ended when the Mountie collared a cowering Indian and cuffed him through the double doors out into the

mud. "The majesty of the law," my friend growled. But we were too relieved to be overly perturbed by the underside of northwestern justice.

"*Probablemente* he does not even love Rose Marie," a wife said.

"I too have suffered a loss," the Byzantine said. He poured another drink and continued. "Someone pulled the plug."

My mad friend glanced at me. We understood perfectly. "No more time machine?"

The Byzantine nodded. "Illogical as it may seem for a machine to draw power from an outlet in an alternate future which no longer exists, it is even more illogical for that plug to be pulled." He sighed. "The paradox is that now when I have a hint that 25th-century New Rome still lives, that very hint has cut off hope of my return to civilization."

"Civilization!" my friend gloomed.

"I still have it," the Byzantine said.

"Your time machine?"

He shook his head. "The camper in which I came last autumn to live by the lake and recharge my spiritual batteries." He sighed again. "There are nice things can be said for fishing."

"By fish?" a wife asked.

"Thank you, Leigh Hunt," my mad friend gloomed. "Did you find an alien intelligence at the bottom of the lake?"

I squinted, trying to reconstruct what seemed to be a missing line in this conversation. From time machines to campers—?

While I was thinking the Byzantine's eyes widened and he dropped his glass. "Somebody did listen!" he erupted with sudden hope. "You've been sent here to—"

I shook my head. "Did a hand come out of the water and hand you Excalibur?"

"I never drive sports cars." The Byzantine was giving me a puzzled look when the doors burst open again, admitting a chill and a Mountie who stood hands-on-hips and glaring. The licensed premises grew silent while the locals searched their consciences and the Mountie searched the room. He lingered over several wives' complexions, then saw something in my friend's blue orb which caused him to look away. After a moment the Mountie took the chill breeze back outdoors along with his six-foot self.

"A few degrees," I suggested.

"Up his lilywhite," my mad friend grunted. "The worst they can do is deport us."

"But to which country?"

My friend surveyed my glass with increased longing.

"I had such hopes," the Byzantine said, and tossed off another drink.

I was wondering if I could keep my wrists inconspicuous under the table while slashing them when he added, "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"We're all spooks," my friend said heavily.

"The other kind. Things that gae boomp i' the nicht." The Byzantine's accent was not all that different from broad Scots.

"Aye," my mad friend gloomed. "Boomp i' the nicht."

"Helicopters have crashed before," I said.

My mad friend sipped coffee.

"I did not think it was a ghost," the Byzantine said. "Charming lake. Fish; pines to the shore; no hint of man save the disappearing road and the remains of some forty-year-old cabin fire."

"So what else is new?" my friend asked. There being no fire departments in this territory, burned-out cabins were hardly a novelty.

"I thought to come to terms with living out my allotted span in this timestream," the Byzantine said. "My dog thought differently."

"You left him at the mercy of wolves and porcupines?"

The small man shook his head. "We were inside; heater lit, and at peace with our Maker. On the roof of the tin yurt fell an occasional pine cone. From the lake came the demented shriek of a lost soul—or a loon. And from around us the calls of owl and wolf. They were friendly sounds."

I wondered if the Byzantine had lived in this timestream long enough to remember a steam train whistle on a winter night. "So you heard a ghost," I said.

"It was what I did not hear."

"Shades of Father Brown!"

"Chesterton was a better theologian than he was a plotter," my mad friend snapped. "And my life is replete with plots."

Across the table wives wondered if fake fur might not be unsuitable for the bionic woman.

But the Byzantine was not to be diverted. "My hound and I were inside a metal-bodied camper which would slow the most persistent of bears. Then suddenly my hound was attentive. It was a moment before I realized he was listening to the same thing as I. The loon was mute; wolves ceased howling; even the wind stopped dropping pine cones on the metal roof." He shuddered. "I had never realized how unnerving silence can be."

"Take me where the cement grows," I murmured.

The dark man nodded. "I assumed some large animal was passing through. But the silence persisted. My hound was whining, glancing from door to roof vent. I bolted the door. For good measure I cranked the roof vent down tight. And then, not from bravado but the better to see and not be seen, we blew out the lamp and went to bed."

"To enjoy the rumsodden sleep of those who tamper with life's orderly processes." My friend's mind was still in another country. I wondered if we were getting old for this work.

The Byzantine studied him. "You too have suffered a disappointment?"

My friend gave a limp Nazi salute. "*Befehl ist Befehl.*"

"Does that mean orders is orders, or render unto Caesar?" My friend did not reply. "Well anyway," I told the Byzantine, "you didn't see a ghost."

He sipped whiskey and pondered. "We were never taught a belief in ghosts," he said. "Those come from your Aryan heresy which kept Mohammed from ever becoming Bishop of Medina." He brushed away a nonexistent fly. "Teutonic mentality slogging through the fog, seeing Nibelungen behind every stump. Now my people who lived under the clear and open eastern sky—"

"Saw djinns in every bottle and God in the whirlwind," my friend finished savagely.

"In your time," the Byzantine conceded, "where we fell into heresy and out of the mainstream. But I was educated in the physical sciences. I cannot understand my sudden fear."

"Possibly you do not see the etymology of Pan and panic," my friend said.

"With the lamp out it was impossible to see anything. But suddenly the camper was rocking." The Byzantine wiped his brow and sipped whiskey. "Given time," he continued, "I might have concluded it was a moose scratching his back or a grizzly snuffling about. But pitch dark in the midst of the forest with my hound acting strangely . . ."

"So the spell of Pan descended upon you." Clearly, my friend was recalling a forty-second crouch waiting for a helicopter.

The Byzantine shuddered. "My hound was under the blankets with me. Minutes passed before I could remember where I'd left the flashlight. When I finally found the courage to shine it out each window I learned nothing new—only that something out there in the dark was making odd snuffling sounds as it tried each door and window."

"Wendigo?"

"More likely porcupine," my friend said.

"It continued for nearly an hour," the Byzantine said, "and even afterward my hound kept telling me it was close. Yes, I thought of the *Wendigo* who catches the solitary traveler by the hand. Who has not heard native nonsense about the footprints which become farther and farther apart and finally disappear? But it had not yet snowed; and in any event, the *Wendigo* is *infra dig* for serious investigators."

"Were it to snow in the tropics," my mad friend said, "a frantic sprint for a line dangled from a moving chopper could produce exactly those footprints."

There was a moment of silence while we dwelt on our disparate thoughts.

"Daylight dispels all ghosts," the Byzantine finally said. "Except this one. Next morning my hound emerged gingerly. Bearing a cocked shotgun, I followed."

"You saw it?" Watching the Byzantine sip whiskey and brush away flies that would not appear for another two months, I doubted if he had seen anything.

"I saw tracks."

"Always wondered what a *Wendigo* looks like," my mad friend muttered. "Probable outgrowth of eagle-steals-baby stories. Did he have birdclaw tracks like the *kotsnakoo*?"

I studied my friend in some surprise. Having grown up around here I knew that particular demon. But how had my mad friend ever learned of it?

The Byzantine waggled his forefinger sideways in a Levantine equivalent of head-shaking. "Baba," he said.

"Rumcakes?" my friend exploded.

"Like a snail."

My friend shifted mental gears from Russian to Spanish. "You mean slime?"

"The camper shell was covered. The trail led to the lake."

This was too coherent to lump with those invisible flies the Byzantine still brushed away. "There's something really there?" In my heart I had always known there was. But this was the first time anyone else had ever heard of it.

The small man was about to answer when the door opened again and once more a hush fell over the suddenly chilled room. The Mountie was striding straight toward our table. "Thought I recognized you," the tall man said.

I was fabricating a new cover and my friend was preparing to take action of an extremely prejudicial nature when it dawned on us that

the Mountie wasn't even looking our way. He was talking to the Byzantine in English-accented French, punctuating with both hands.

I heard something about *poix* which is pitch or *pois* which are peas. Seconds later I knew they were talking about *poires*, which can be either pears or light bulbs. Then they were into *poison* or *poisson* and a *poissonnière* or maybe a *poisoneur*—which meant somebody was poisoning the fish or else the peas were in the fish kettle—or perhaps they were biting on light bulbs that morning.

The Byzantine studied the Mountie through eyes that had seen many things, all bad. He was tossing off another shot when the dismounted policeman turned to my mad friend. There was the swift, takes-one-to-know-one appraisal; and then he was speaking French to my mad friend, who seemed less bewildered than I. The only words I caught were *écrivain américain* from my friend. The Mountie shot me a mental martini of two-thirds hate and one-third disgust. A moment later he was gone, letting a final blast of frigid air into the licensed premises.

"Mexican standoff," my mad friend said. I glanced at several wives of that persuasion. "He would dearly love to roust the lot of us," my friend continued, "but is also scared shitless of repercussions."

"Tell him," I suggested, "that if he agrees not to exhume our racial problems I'll refrain from writing about how the French treat Indians like the Anglos treat the French."

"And in Sweden we have the Lapps," my friend muttered.

"Don't know what we are," a wife was saying.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Indians," a wife explained. "They're friendly. Always try to talk with us in the store or wherever. But they can't understand Spanish or any of our other languages."

"Slime everywhere," the Byzantine resumed pointedly. "It was midday before I began thinking of Loch Ness and then remembering local accounts of why this region where I camp is no longer populated."

"Oh Christ, are we back onto that again?" My friend had problems of his own.

"A few more degrees and we're in another country," I suggested. My mad friend shook his head.

"I spent the afternoon fishing," the Byzantine continued. "And my hound spent the afternoon close to me—totally uninterested in rabbits or squirrels. We dined on bass and grayling but in our minds lay the expectation of nightfall."

"So why didn't you move on?" my friend snapped.

The Byzantine offered a sad smile. "Why don't you? *¿Machismo?* Once a man starts running where does he stop?"

"Exactly." My friend was talking to me.

"Besides," the Byzantine added, "a civilized man dares not believe in ghosts."

"I never knew ectoplasm was slimy," my mad friend said.

Certain things began coming together. Had I not been preoccupied the connection would have come sooner. "What're you doing on the place where I was born?" I demanded. "Is there nothing sacred to your bloody time-tampering?" If the Byzantine was fiddling around my birthplace with a time machine I might abruptly be found never to have existed.

"*¿Sacred to you?*" the Byzantine inquired. "It makes years that you do not— Anyway, people no longer live in that valley. And I also no longer have a time machine."

"What happened to the people?" my friend asked.

"The railroad never came. Those who stayed were bought out or foreclosed by the Territorial Government when it was decided to let the country go back to fish and game."

I suppose I should have kept in better touch with my native soil, but . . .

"You were an infant when your parents made a precipitate decision to leave," the Byzantine said. "In those days they called you Jim."

My mad friend gave me an odd look. "Born here? Never knew that."

"It's why we're here now," I explained. "As long as we had to disappear for a while I thought we might go someplace familiar."

"A precipitate departure?" my friend asked.

I shrugged. "Have you ever seen statistics on cabin fever?"

The Byzantine, my mad friend, and several wives were all staring now. "It's just the loneliness of these godawful winters," I continued. "I can vaguely recall Himself and Mother snapping one another's heads off. Then suddenly we were in town and they lived happily for the next forty years."

"And they called you Jim?" the Byzantine persisted.

"I've been called worse."

My mad friend turned on the Byzantine. "If it was a fish and game preserve, what were you doing there?"

The Byzantine turned on his fluorescent smile. "Rough fish," he explained.

My mad friend was puzzled; but this much, at least, I could recall of my wild and wooly origins. "Perch, carp, suckers, anything not all that good to eat." I could guess the rest. The small man was allowed all the fish he wanted because they were going to spread rotenone. After the poison biodegraded, Fish and Wildlife would restock the lake with naught but the most succulent of trout and grayling: an urbane and well-paved path back to nature. "But what freaks you about *Jim*?"

"Nothing," the Byzantine said. "Despite forebodings, my dog and I passed a quiet night. It was not until next morning that I discovered slime tracks again. This time the windshield had a semicircular trace with a dot in the middle." He scribbled on a cocktail napkin and handed it to me. I studied the drawing.

My mad friend took the napkin. "*Jim!*"

I stared.

"Arabic letter," he said. "Pronounced *jim* unless you're Bedouin and prefer *gim*."

"You're not Arab," I told the Byzantine.

He shrugged. "After the Pythagoreans imposed their odd religious concepts onto the Greek alphabet there remained no way to indicate a hard *j* sound. In my century we had adapted the Arab *jim* into our *koine* alphabet."

"Pythagoreans?" my friend echoed.

"Back when our time stream was still common," the small man said. "To make their system work, the vowels and the planets had to be equal in number. They changed the *eta* into a vowel—a totally superfluous *epsilon*—and forced us to use a reversed apostrophe for an *h*. To illustrate God's special favor to Pythagoras, modern Greek must use the equivalent of *mt* to render the *d* that was formerly the province of the *delta*, which has since become a voiced *theta*—and why one sees that orthographic monstrosity *mpar* since a *beta* can still render the *v* in *taverna* but not the English *b* in *bar*."

"Fascinating," my mad friend growled. "But it's still snail tracks."

"You remember nothing?" the Byzantine asked me.

"I was only two." But as I said it I was remembering. Couldn't have understood at the time, I suppose. My memories would be of years later when they endlessly rehashed old arguments. Mother had been obsessed by the thought that something savage lurked just outside the cabin door waiting to devour me. Considering the cougar population, there was nothing paranoid in this notion.

"It remembered you," the Byzantine said.

*Un frisson.* Yet, it seemed now that I had always known something

about the old place that my parents had not understood. At two I had been adamant about not wanting to leave. Nor have I ever really been at home anywhere else. My mother thought I spent too much time among Indians. My father, who spoke no German, insisted that I had absorbed some strange *Weltanschauung* that saw nature as *Gestalt* instead of the sum of its parts.

"This snail is intelligent?" my friend asked.

"Rather more than we," the Byzantine assured him. "And it was not a snail. The organism was amorphous, coherent only in an amoebalike way—as visible as a rope of eggwhite in water."

"And did this creature communicate by *Urim* and *Thummin*?"

"The casting of divine lots requires hands," the Byzantine said. "It took me days to still primordial terrors and understand this thing meant me no ill—wished only to communicate."

"It had ears?" This was the first time my mad friend had really emerged from himself since that damned helicopter.

The Byzantine wagged his finger. "Nor was it a telepath. It could see certain images on the surface of my mind; but despite centuries in that lake awaiting rescue, it was only partially able to bridge an interspecies cultural gap."

While I wondered what in hell the Byzantine was talking about, my mad friend was a quantum jump ahead. "Do you—did you—will you use question marks in 25th-century *koine* punctuation?"

The Byzantine wagged his finger again. "Greek had evolved until declarative and interrogative forms were obvious without punctuation."

This, at least, I could understand. Question marks are really unnecessary in English, whereas in most Romance tongues the identical phrasing of question and answer really demands an advance ζ as well as the terminal ? to warn the reader. What I could still not understand was what we were doing on the edge of the Arctic talking about monsters on the old homestead.

"So that Arabic *jim* dredged from your eidetic system was a question," my mad friend concluded. "It thought you were a mature Jim returned home." Studying me, he added, "Twould help explain a mental set always thirty degrees out of plumb with local gravity."

"All the world is odd save me and thee," a wife quoted.

The Byzantine had been drinking steadily, but he was not half seas over. Totally coherent, he continued, "Once I learned to visualize my remarks in writing it was easier."

"He could make pages of printout appear in your mind?"

"He?" a wife asked.

"Saints preserve us from the libbers," my friend growled. Several wives returned to their discussion of the ecological implications of fake fur.

"Probably 'she'," the Byzantine said. "Her body must have covered the whole lake bottom. Her answers were written on the water—glutinous phrases changing as fast as I could read. She offered anything for help to get off planet."

"So now we don't even have to invent our own fantastic new weapons." I did not find the prospect cheering.

"Should have asked her how to get your time machine plugged back in," my friend said.

The Byzantine regarded us with the terrifying expression of someone washed in the blood of the lamb and born again. "It was an intelligence far beyond ours," he declaimed.

I sighed. The Byzantine had been dropping in and out of our lives for a generation. It is always sad to see an old friend come apart.

"Once aerodynamics demonstrated the fallacy of wings *in vacuo* saucers replaced angels," my mad friend said.

The Byzantine nodded vigorously. "One must remember that *angelos* is just the Greek for messenger, and hence evangel for good news or gospel or—"

"So you're coping out and laying all the blame on some dispatch rider from the Supreme Indifference?" I asked. My friend made a ritual gesture of exorcism and picked up his coffee. It was cold. Then abruptly the room was cold once more as the Mountie reappeared and strode toward our table. This time he addressed himself to my mad friend and me. "Sorry," he said in English. "I had you confused with somebody else."

Which meant he had bounced a few inquiries off a comsat and gotten the official Ottawese to lay off. A wife exchanged a quiet smile with an Indian across the room. "You understand, of course," I said, "that I must still write my report."

"I understand you perfectly, sir," the Mountie said. "May I offer you all a ride?"

My mad friend gave him a sharp glance and decided the offer was less sinister than it sounded. The Byzantine was already slipping into a coat. "You must see it," he insisted. "It's only—"

"I know how many miles it is," I said. We had been cooling our heels in this tiny town for over a week, and for some reason I had not yet drummed up the gumption to rent a 4-wheel and go look at this remnant of my past. "Who's laying on transportation?"

"Fish and Game," the Byzantine explained. "Now that it's thawed

they're heading out to restock the lake. There's plenty of room on the truck."

"Truck?" a wife inquired with mounting horror.

"More like a bus, actually," the Mountie said. From his sudden affability I decided we still retained some clout in spite of crashed choppers and other unpleasantnesses. The Mountie struggled not to ruffle the visiting dignitaries no matter how Indian. Someone had sent him a rocket which we could employ in behalf of the locals. "Really, it's quite comfortable," he assured our wives. "And wouldn't you like to see where your husband first entered the world?"

While wives digested this I digested the Mountie's detailed knowledge.

Once away from the licensed premises, the heated bus was comfortable enough. It also gave my mad friend time to digest the Byzantine's story. "First contacts fall into one of two categories," he observed. "Either the monsters devour us without cavil or condiment—or one retreats into the prelogic of fairy tales and three wishes. What did the monster offer you?"

"Look who's turning into a critic," I growled.

But the Byzantine's reply did not fit my mad friend's *schema*. As the bus bounced over frost-hardened ruts he said, "No deal."

"Didn't even offer to lay the whole world at your feet?" my mad friend asked disappointedly.

"The alien could not read thoughts or transmit its own to me," the small man said. "It could only see clearly visualized images in my mind. It took me days to understand that words and phrases on the lake surface were not answers—only reflections from the surface of my own mind. It was even longer before the thing understood that I am not Jim."

My mad friend muttered something about The Importance of Being Earnest.

Having written a little SF, it has always been part of my job to speculate on what an alien's prime concern might be. Surely not 'take me to your leader' or 'Dr. Livingstone?' It had never occurred to me that a visitor from another star might be concerned primarily in distinguishing between myself and a small dark man whose life continually intersects mine.

"People actually lived in this country?" a wife demanded as we bounced from one boulder to the next.

I ignored the remark.

"One day I closed my eyes and concentrated on the image of myself writing *who are you and where from?*," the Byzantine continued.

"After that we began to communicate."

"What annoys me about this plot," my mad friend said, "is the assumption that man was too stupid to work things out for himself—that civilization was handed to him by some creature totally beyond the bounds of Theology and Free Will."

There are occasions when I agree with my friend. "Especially," I added, "since all the truly important discoveries were made before the invention of writing."

"Save perhaps stirrups and the horsecollar," my friend amended.

Wives were looking at us with that expression saved for husbands who are being especially obtuse.

"How many species of animal have been domesticated lately?" I explained.

"But the thing at the bottom of the lake did offer information?" My friend addressed the Byzantine. "In exchange for what?"

The small man shrugged. "It would be centuries before Earth could offer a ship of sufficient size. She asked to be left in peace."

"Aha! Non-proliferation treaties," my friend said. I caught a single sharp glance in the mirror from the blue-uniformed man who drove. If the Mountie was listening he was being professional about it.

"I suppose in return for no more nuclear reactors and not burning any more coal or petroleum or damming any more rivers to stop the flow of sand to the beaches we were going to be handed a cheap, pollution-free source of unlimited energy?"

"We have it." The Byzantine glanced upward where the sun contended with clouds. "The thing in the lake offered the technology. Also—" Hours of drinking were finally catching up with the small man. His speech was slurring deeper into Sephardic dialect where every *ess* becomes an *esh*. "If only someone had listened," he complained. "It was too complex for me. If there had been engineers to evaluate and record . . ."

"How many other fates did it save us from?" my mad friend asked.

"Everything," the Byzantine mourned. "It came from an older place. War, overpopulation, pollution—all the unhappinesses and injustices had solutions."

"Final solutions?" my mad friend grunted.

But the Byzantine was insistent. "Simple ways to keep population below food production. Nobody had to die. All the suffering could have ended."

"Could have?" The little man was so intense I began to wonder if there might actually be something out there in the lake. My mother had certainly thought so.

The small man extracted a flask from his coat pocket and drank deeply. He put his face into the crook of his arm and it was a moment before I saw he was weeping. "Look," I consoled. "All is not lost. We're going out with you to look, aren't we?"

My mad friend touched my arm and shook his head. While wives dithered over the unstrung Byzantine I looked a question. "Have you forgotten why we're going out to restock the lake?" my friend asked.

"What difference could a few fish make to something that size?" And then I remembered the rotenone. So they *had* been poisoning the fish—as well as anything else that lived in the lake. If the Byzantine's BEM had ever existed, it most assuredly didn't now.

"Why'd you leave?" I asked. "If you were that sure you might've gotten your pet to put on a show and convince the poisoners."

"Cold," the small man blubbered. "My dog and I could no longer live in the camper. As the lake began freezing our savior began to slow down too. We were to resume in the spring."

My mad friend and I looked at each other. Either the Byzantine had finally drunk himself round the bend or we must accept the alternative—that there really had been something out there, that humanity had screwed up its last best hope. Esau sold out for a mess of pottage. What was Fish and Game getting for a mess of cutthroat trout?

The bus *cum* fish tank was grinding gears over this memory of a road, creating enough noise to make it doubtful whether the driver and mountie had overheard us. I guessed it no longer made any difference. We were subdued when the truck reached the end of the trail and, after careful maneuvers over soft ground, backed around to dump a cascade of fingerling trout into the lake.

I wandered about trying to remember the place. There were faint hints of where the cabin had been, but there was no nostalgia in the second-hand recollections of my parents.

"Wishful thinking," my mad friend was muttering. "All in mortal peril and we've forgotten how to pray."

Coming from him, this was a damaging admission. I turned from his despair to watch the last fingerlings slip and flip down the chute from tank to lake. Despite springtime it seemed a drearily hopeless end to a day. Poor Byzantine. Poor humanity.

"*Mira!*" a wife shrieked. From her volume it had to be at least a bear. But she was pointing at the lake. The Byzantine turned and then everybody was looking as the newly stocked fingerlings swam in formation. Their numbers were spelling out **JIM**.

## IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: The Gremlin and the Glitch

On the shores of space at the Earth Fleet base,  
When the starships yaw and pitch  
There are beasts, no doubt, you will hear about  
Called the Gremlin and the Glitch.  
When the proton force blows a ship off-course  
And the ion motors twitch  
All the spacemen claim you can place the blame  
On the Gremlin and the Glitch.

For the Gremlin plays with the cosmic rays  
In the depths of a nebula cloud,  
And she shoots croquet with the Milky Way  
And the universe laughs out loud.  
So when spacemen roam far away from home  
And their gravity fields grow weak,  
Or their photon rays travel out of phase,  
Or the coffee pot springs a leak,  
Or if something goes wrong,  
Well, it doesn't take long  
To determine who gets the blame:  
But you'll never find a trace  
Of that critter from space,  
And the *Gremlin* is her name!

If an engine appears to be stripping its gears  
And it makes strange noises and hums,  
If a data bank chooses to blow twenty fuses  
When it should be counting up sums,  
If the captain's spare pants just get up and dance  
And the robots twiddle their thumbs,  
Or if anything breaks or falls apart  
The spacemen nod and look real smart  
And the new recruits will find that they have signed  
Up for a hitch  
On a starship that's bedeviled  
By the Gremlin and the Glitch!

Now the Glitch plays pranks with oxygen tanks  
And he bollixes machines.  
And the Glitch just smiles when atomic piles  
Get blown to smithereens.  
So if something goes wrong on your trip to the stars,  
If you aim for Jupiter but land on Mars,  
If your problems never go away  
Then you can bet some niche  
Of your spaceship has a stowaway:  
The grinning, gleeful *Glitch*!

MORAL:

So when that pair of holy terrors  
Who delight in causing errors  
And who make machines malfunction  
Try to come and bother *you*,  
Then the only thing to do  
Is to QWERTYUIOP ETAOIN SHRDLU SHRDLU SHRDLU

(Note: due to a sudden unaccountable malfunction of all twenty-seven of our Linotype terminals, we regret that PYRZQXGL EFSITZ IRTNOG.)

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre





# MALLWORLD GRAFFITI

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: Artifact



She used to squeeze the filet mignon from the middle of the tube. She wore potato-sacks to respectable parties instead of wisping around in seemly nudity. Her mothering instinct drove me crazy—forcing me to meet the mortgage on our kids (the little angels with their squalid, uneugenic faces, that bootleg genemonger look, and their acrid, intractable personalities)—pestering me to buy new clunkers for our kitchenette, new caffoid-carts, new sleaz-o-matics for our bed. . . .

Oh, and the children! Running amok, tripping the clunkers over the dinner as it squirted from the computer, leaving their toys around for me to trip over, spraying their underwear all over the door so it couldn't iris open. . . .

I couldn't stand the pack of them, but what could I do? I was under contract, a contract stupidly thumbed under the Great Seal of the Holy Judaeo-Buddhist Matrimonial Agency itself, renégement punishable by three years in a sanitization clinic or a fine of twelve kilocreds. In those days I managed an instant pet store in Mallworld, and I certainly couldn't afford an annulment *and* pay the baby company *and* my share of the condo-azroid with time-sharing transmat and comsim facilities too! In short, I was a member of a silent minority which the philosophers of our time have deemed extinct since the Dark Ages . . . the harried husband.

Small discomforts, you may say. And yet. . . .

In their own little way, it was these minor aches and pains of life that gave birth to a masterpiece.

Not to mention the Selespridar . . .

You know, after a while it becomes very easy to get into the habit of thinking of the Selespridar as "The Gods." After all, they are so powerful—didn't they thrust that unbreachable barrier all around the orbit of Saturn, walling in our solar system, and shunt our whole shebang into a vacant little parallel universe—for "our own good"? Without so much as ruffling one strand of their wild magenta hair. As my personal comsim-cum-bedtime story teller used to tell me when I was a kid, "Yes, Robbie, you can curse them all you like, and dream about the Universe that we've lost—but you must admit they haven't done badly. There are no more wars—or only little ones, anyway; and everything seems pretty prosperous."

Oh yes, the average person thinks of a Selespridon and he thinks *omnipotent* and *infallible* and all those things we humans aren't.

Certainly more so than those hokey religions whose evangidroids blare forth recondite doctrines on every level of Mallworld, hyping and entrapping the unwary shopper.

Personally, I never thought much about them. They were there, and they were presumably all-wise and all that; but I didn't lust after the stars, even though this was very fashionable in the circles of prestigiopretentiousness of the milieu in which my parents (and therefore I as a child) moved back in Babylon-5. I mean it was a huge scientific wonder that they managed to keep that mighty force-shield in place around the solar system, but beyond that—

Until the Selespridar changed my life.

Quite without knowing it. You could hardly blame them for one little glitch in the forceshield, could you now?

One little glitch in two centuries?

Oh, no, you're saying now. Not another story about That Famous Glitch.

Okay. You saw it on your holovue. But chances are you weren't one of the thousands who were working in Mallworld, or who happened to be whisking their auto-carts through their weekend shopping spree, or were just plain hanging out, when it happened. And I was.

And for most people it was a nine-day-wonder, to be marvelled at, stored, forgotten. But it changed my life.

But to see why, you have to go back about twenty years, Earth reckoning.

Life in Babylon-5 was the closest thing *Homo sapiens* had to an FTL drive. Fashions changed every twenty-four Earth hours and were regulated by android proctors who would spray the new clothes on you on the spot and fine you a cred. Everyone was either an artist or an aesthete: and both my parents were aesthetes. Dad ran a holovue lecture series on "Myth and Archetype in the Architectural Ambience of Ancient Fast-food Restaurants." Mother was a disciple of the Xeno-Zen cult, finding meditative fulfillment in the contemplation of the tripartite navel of Kmengdreft, a Selespridon who'd escaped from their equivalent of a loony bin and found us dumb earthies a little more congenial.

With parents such as those, I, Robo Ishi-Leone, was bound to be a great artist—or so my parents said. By the time I was seven they'd bribed me into the best Art School on Deimos, and I'd begun to make my mark as a snowman.

It seemed like a good choice. I was antisocial, and snowmen are

lonely artists. I enjoyed scooting through space in my beat-up old toyochev, squirting water into little ice-platelets, each with its little stasis-motor, and then sitting at the controls and waldoing each teeny flake into place so that they caught the light just right and became an image . . . classic pointillism was in by the time I reached puberty, and also the new trick of having concealed light sources buried in the mass of ice-flakes; I was doing some pretty workman-like stuff. I did a little ice-garden for Mom to meditate in, just a couple of transmat stops from home, far enough to be by itself in the starless blackness that is the human race's prison. She used it a couple of times, and once even got Kmengdreft to perform his little tea-ceremony there. Afterwards, I had to clean the tea-leaves off some of the ice-chunks, practically by hand. I also made Dad a charming little ice McDonald's set in a delicately shimmering lawn-like tapestry of icicled french fries. A simple, dumb idea, but it was Art.

I had no intention of making a profession of it. I wanted—like every kid—to be a big-league baseball star.

Time passed; my parents ignored me as was then the fashion.

One fine day in early adolescence, I'd hopped into the toyochev, crashed through the ceiling of my bedroom and matted into deep space, towing a reservoir of water behind me. I'd just popped out of a ring of buoys somewhere between the belt and Jupiter, bumming by my lonesome as was usual for my teenaged self; and right then and there, I decided to create an extraordinary ice-sculpture. The sort of thing that academic bores like Dad would lecture about five hundred years from now.

I made my car whirl madly in the darkness, sending water-spurts sparkling about me like a laser buzz saw. After I'd gathered quite a cloud of the things, and I'd used the auto-stick to plaster an invisible stasis-thing on each, I began playing around.

First I moved the ice-flakes abstractly. I spun sort of an icy spiderweb, using one of the pre-sets in my field controller; and then I put myself at the center and prowled about. Gradually I introduced shifts into the web, making the lines of ice undulate, collapse into irregular hundred-meter long polyhedrons; and now I was an insect buzzing in and out of a mobile of ice, rotating slowly in the blackness. There wasn't much light except what I generated from the car itself, and so the construct changed constantly as paths of colored light criss-crossed it . . .

I was in a kind of daze, I guess. You get into quite a power trip, alone in space pushing great gobs of glitter around. In no time I

found that I'd been working for a couple of days.

Of course I wouldn't be missed—my Dad was on a field trip to Earth, excavating a Gino's in Old New Delhi, and my mother had signed up for a year's hiber-trance as part of her cultish activities. But I'd had enough. I decided to circle my latest abstract thing one more time and beat it.

I planted a light-source at its heart. Then I spun out and drifted around my creation. It was utterly chaotic, but so was my life at the time, I guess . . .

Thousands of wafer-flakes gathered into sparklets that ringed a fluffy-soft center where the strands of the discarded web had fallen into folds of a gossamer mist-veil. Sometimes you could get so lost in the sheer prettiness of what you were doing that you forgot what you were trying to do completely.

Well, I'd worked *that* out of my system, and I was all ready to go back and do a little *real* work. When—

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a car. A toyochev, but like nothing you've ever seen.

Talk about gaudy! It was solid gold and shaped like an ancient galleon, with winged gargoyles spouting colored jetstreams from the stern and flapping their gilt-feathered wings. I rubbed my eyes. Yes, this . . . monstrosity that reeked of megacredits was banked right beside me, and when I started to maneuver towards the ring of buoys that marked the transmat gate to the next nexus, *it followed me*.

I dodged, plumbing the ice madness I'd built. Sending flake-shards flying. The galleon kept pace easily. I carved great holes in the polyhedral center of the ice-thing, and the galleon sailed right through them.

Now they weren't doing anything wrong—I mean, space is free and all—but they were getting the hell on my nerves. To an artist, especially to a young, undeveloped, hypersensitive, and antisocial one like me, being observed in mid-doodle is worse than being watched *in medias* doo-doo.

I subvoked some mean commands to my car's pilot. My stomach did aerial back-hand-springs as my car vaulted around the shambles of my two-days' sketching. Until I finally heard a voice over the intervoke—

"Want to come aboard, cute little snowman?" I froze.

That voice! It was like . . .

*Aha, I thought. She's been spying on me, she's the type that goes for lonesome artists, and I'll make a quick conquest right here in the middle of nowhere. What an adventure!* The voice—

Like lolling on warm fur by candlelight. Like—

"Sure," I answered in what I hoped was an adult voice. "Right away, at your service."

The demat-instructions came through in that same sensual voice, and in a moment I was standing in a little whitewalled chamber in her toyochev, looking at the most beautiful woman in the world.

I wanted to rush right over and pull a number on her, but she motioned me away. The room was divided in two by a little brook, and her side of it was taken up by a gigantic fluff-bed. The bright red artfur of it was rippling and rustling like flames.

"Art," she said at last. "So transient. You wrecked your toy picture running away from me, my cute little snowman. . . ."

I stared at her, dropping all politeness by the wayside. She had incredibly long grass-green hair that twined around her nude body, wreathing the soft curve of her breasts and veiling those parts that young men love to see. To be nude is of course to wear the completely innocent, unconcealing yet untouchable little-girl look, and yet the copious hair made it all so voluptuous, so desirable . . . I just gaped at her.

"Shall we?" she said. I could only nod.

And then afterwards she said, "I'm just a cradle-snatcher after all, my little snowman."

"You're not old!" I protested—how innocent I was!—and I took a handful of her hair and I twisted it, boa-constrictor-fashion, round and round our shoulders, our bodies. . . .

"I am a hundred years old, my child."

"A hundred ye—" I backed off, lost my foothold on the fur, stumbled into the brook. I got up sopping, feeling like a fool. "Sorry, I mean I didn't mean to criticize your age. I mean I—"

And then I looked into her eyes.

She was that old. Those eyes, a clear gray-green, had an oldness like mountains, like the sea . . . to summon up all the imagery of ancient dead poets. Her face—that could have been built yesterday. It was perfectly formed. Not a flaw, not a scratch, not a wrinkle.

"Science can do wonders if you have the money. Especially Seles-pridon science . . . I've been old for so long, little snowman, I've become morbid, my dear . . . you turned up at just the right moment."

So she'd just been using me to relieve some pent-up tension! I'd just happened along at the right time! But when I gazed on her she looked so perfect . . . what did I care that every particle of her flesh had been lovingly crafted by the magic-cum-science of our alien

overlords? This antisocial, hyperaesthetic social misfit was in love!

"When . . . will I see you again?" I stammered. I didn't even know who she was.

She sighed, a murmur music at once languid and jaded and strangely entrancing. "You're all alike, you young ones. Always into permanence."

"I'm different—" I cried desperately.

"Yes, yes." Again, that throaty sigh. And then she handed me a crystal card. "Don't read it till you've left. And by the way, I'm having a little soiree next week. I'll see you there."

And, abruptly, she had walked over the bed to a demat-booth and vanished.

I didn't have a plan of her car—more palace than car—I wouldn't have known how to pursue her. All I could do was step into the booth on my side of the brook and order it to send me back to my car.

Afterwards, I took out the card and waited.

My broken ice-sculpture, shattered into a thousand momenta by our chase scene, was flung out all over the next few cubiklicks by now. I just saw a couple of chunks floating forlornly by. In the blackness shone the white point that was Jupiter; but of course there were no stars. The stars were outside our universe, beyond the Sellespridon barrier.

And then the card spoke to me in her voice. Just two words. Her name.

There's class and there's *class*. I'd always thought my family were pretty exalted—coming from Babylon-5's artistic enclave and all. But the name that the card breathed to me, in its langorously seductive voice, was more than class.

The card said, *Theresa barJulian*.

I had heard of her. She was a member of humanity's most powerful clan. She was Mistress of Mallworld.

I had just made love to the richest woman in the known universe.

Dad was standing six inches high on the kitchen table when I got back. You didn't get much background on the transmat call system, but I could vaguely make out the outline of a crumbling fast-food restaurant against a kaleidoscope of tumultuous Earthie traffic.

"Dad," I said, "Dad, I've been invited to a party by Theresa barJulian!"

"I'm coming right back!" he growled. "This has gone too far—" The connection snapped.

In the morning Mom matted into my room. "Your father called

me," she said.

"For that you climbed out of your religious hiber-trance, Mom? You shouldn't have . . ."

"I forbid it!" she screamed. She looked haggard. On her way home she must've been stopped by the fashion proctors, because I could see tatters of last week's flamboyant fire-jeans peeking from underneath today's silk-striped sackcloth muu-muu.

"Forbid what?"

"Theresa bar Julian's too frightening for words. She owns half the Universe!"

"Pope's boobs!" I swore. "You're just scared of losing control of me, that's what! You're just jealous because you're not the only woman in my life, you're stuck in your reverse-Oedipal shtick or something. And because she's a million times more rich and powerful than *you'll ever be*—"

"We tried so hard to raise you to be artistic, not to be part of that tacky, decadent life—"

"When are you going to understand, Mother? Staring at navels and speculating on the eating habits of primitive earthies isn't what I want out of life! I don't even want to carve ice-blocks anymore! I'm in love, and I know what I'm doing!"

In about half an hour I found myself with nothing but a beat-up toyochev and fifty creds to my name, hauling it through the blackness of space on my way to Mallworld.

Mallworld!

Oh, I'd been there before . . . I was never a hick. I knew Mallworld was a thirty-click-long shopping center coursing through space, somewhere between the belt and Jupiter, and that it is the place where all dreams come true, to quote the old romantic song. Mother had sometimes whisked me through there when we were out of some rare alien incense for one of her weird rituals, or to get Dad a souvenir from the only store that wasn't earthside that sold relics of the ancient temples of Colonel Sanders and the other hokey antique religions. But we'd avoided it on the whole; and usually I never had time to drink it all in, what with being constantly on the leash, as it were, and with their incomprehensible (though fashionable at the time) anachronistic disdain for commercialism. Oh yes, they were back-to-nature freaks. Our home air conditioner used gasoline extract to simulate the peaceful unspoiled air of primal Earth. . . .

But this was different. I was alone in Mallworld, I had run away to be with the Goddess of commercialism herself!

Well, the first few days, while I was waiting for the party—

I walked the tall halls, level upon level of corkscrew corridors and gravi-looped walkways, tier upon tier of brash shops festooned with color-screeching holo-ads; sensuous androids selling sex; rambunctious robots peddling insurance; flying auto-shopping-carts that disbursed free samples of deodorants, expectorants, and autosuggestible sycophants; demat-booths that popped you in and out of churches, restaurants, shrink shacks, suicide parlors, skating rinks, feelie-palaces, zonkie hangouts, grandstands, bandstands, and copulands; and—

It was heady. Very heady.

And when I found out that Theresa barJulian's little card was a passport that thumbed the way open to an infinitude of freebies . . .

I ate at the Galaxy Palace under the simulated stardome. I hit the auto-coutures and decked myself out in a different outfit every few hours. I stayed at the Gaza Plaza, the hotel hollowed out of the Great Pyramid of Giza (so they said) and hauled to Mallworld at excruciating expense. When I was bored with splendor I raced the sidewalks—there were always a few other kids, but I didn't speak with them, I was proud of my solitude—skipping from hi-speed to mid-speed to lo-speed and trying to trip up the clunkers as they clanked by on their errands. If I wanted anything, a computer simulacrum, buzzing boisterously as it flitted past, would tell me where to go and to hell with the cost. I laughed when I thought of Mom and Dad kicking me out and *knowing* I wasn't well-thumbed enough to throw my credit around.

But I saw Theresa's face everywhere I looked. And I still had eight days left before the week was up.

On the third day I discovered Levitol.

I tripped in the drug palace at first. Then I started floating around the corridors, telling myself how fantastic I felt. After that I gave up completely on caution and I began to drift in and out of demat-booths in a state of stupefied bliss, my eyes glazed over, dreaming of Theresa's hair, flying figure-eights and other nifty aerobatics around the heads of the throngs of shoppers. . . .

They say that Levitol leads to Brevitol. . . .

That was a much more dangerous drug. It didn't make you hover around harmlessly for a couple of hours. It made an hour seem like a minute or a minute seem like an hour, you couldn't tell in advance, and it knocked me out.

Two seconds later, it seemed, it was time for Theresa barJulian's party, and I was a confirmed addict.

A zonkie.

I came to, collared a passing comsim for directions. The miniature pink man buzzed round my face, confirming my identity and running some kind of security check, and then he whispered the level number in my ear.

"There's no point in trying to memorize it," he jabbered in his tinny voice, "the number changes automatically at indeterminate intervals." Then he vanished.

Eagerly I elbowed aside a troupe of Boy Scouts who were walking a dozen gaboochis on leashes, trod on the toe of a passing anchorite, kicked aside a sulking shopping bag, nearly got beaned by a zonked-out spiderman in a toga, and hopped into a booth.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

The cream of human society—not to mention the odd Selespridon—was drifting by my eyes. We were in an intimate sort of... bedroom; it definitely contained a monster of a diamond-shaped fluff-bed, curtained by some smoky material and supported on kaleidolithic columns. Trays of hors d'oeuvres putted and pranced from guest to guest. They were as outré a bunch as I'd ever seen: weird, custom-built somatypes with more arms and heads than a Hindu god; members of the new "minimalist" school who had had all their limbs amputated at hideous expense, and now winged it about in prostheses or, worse still, had been reduced to heads on hovering silver platters; and the few Selespridar, who must have been as scandalized as I, two meters tall with rippling magenta hair and that strange, feral, erotic odor that wafted behind them wherever they went, surveying the scene in a befuddled befogment.

I didn't know any of them, my Brevitol high had begun to wear off, and I was embarrassed to be there. I recognized some of the people from the holovee—I mean, I could have wagered the Pope's bra that that four-tier-tunicked Selespridon munching a drumstick in the corner was none other than Klutharion, governor of the solar system, I mean we were talking *that* class of people—and I wanted to go home.

I was scared.

And then I saw *her*!

The curtains dissolved. She was lying on the fluff-bed in all her glory, cloaked in her shimmering hair, and she was as beautiful as I remembered her; and beside her, smug and smirking and horribly handsome, was a naked young man who wasn't me.

Well! You see how ridiculously naïve I used to be! But I was in love, and what else was there to do? I charged.

She looked at me. Her eyelids fluttered for a moment, and I knew

that she was searching her memory.

"Why, it's Robbie," she said. Her lips curved, ever so slightly, into a graceful smile. She tossed her head; her hair shuddered and parted a little, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of thigh. "How sweet of you to come. I was getting all depressed, and thinking of death and being very morbid, my little snowman, and that's why I threw this party. Everyone's here. Why don't you join me on my bed?"

Everyone was listening now, even the ones who were pretending not to. It was like being in one of those Byzantine imperial courts in the bad old gas-guzzling era.

"Come on," she said, "don't mind *him*." Reluctantly I climbed aboard. "I do so love your dark hair and your snow-pale skin and your little button of a nose and your blue-marble eyes. You look just like a little snowman, no?" I glared balefully at my rival, who only sniggered.

"I can't hope to compete with *him*," I said archly, "on the physical appearance level. But—" I stopped. The whole imperial court was in convulsions. I suddenly realized they were laughing at *me*. "What the—"

"Terry here," said the young man whom I was attempting to treat with amused disdain, "gets about three unrequited lovers a day, and one in twenty gets a contract with The Way Out Suicide Parlor within the week. What today's youth is coming to!"

"How dare you call her Terry!" I cried hotly. "She's a—goddess!"

"And I'm a god," he said. "I'm Julian bar Julian the Fourteenth, Terry's brother, and I'm old enough to be your grandfather, little snowman."

My humiliation was complete.

Or so I thought. . . .

*I'll never live this down. Never, never, never. "I—"*

"Don't worry, dear, dear little snowman . . . you are so charming, don't you see? It was naughty of you to charge up to me like that, even Klutharion wouldn't dare do it, but your naivete is so touching, so authentic. I've half a mind to keep you in stock for a while."

"So that's it, huh?" I said. "Keep me in stock like a breed-animal. Well, I'm more than a toy! I'm a—I'm a—" but what was I? "I'm an artist," I finished lamely. Mocking guffaws echoed across the room. I was flushed. "But I am one!"

She shushed the crowd with a finger on her lips. I wanted to spring upon her and devour her, but . . . "So you are, little snowman, so you are."

"I'll prove it!" I said, knowing I'd gone too far now.

"Very well." There was dead silence.

"Lately," she went on (she spoke so softly I had to strain to hear her), "I've been thinking about dying a lot. I want a mausoleum for myself. Even with all this alien magic-medicine, I doubt I'll last another year—" (A chorus of sycophantic cluck-clucks ran round the room. Her eyes flashed, silencing them at once.) "You see, little snowman? Build me . . . an ice-sculpture worthy of me. Light it with the light of Saturn, the farthest planet of our human universe. A huge ice-statue of me, a thousand times life-size, standing at the gateway between our universe and the *real* universe outside the Selespridon barrier . . . I shall have my coffin placed in its navel."

Thunderous applause now. "I'll do it."

She laughed, but not really *at* me. "Do you love me that much, little snowman?"

"Yes! Yes!" I said, my cheeks burning.

"Enough to devote your life to a foolish old woman's whim?"

"Yes already!"

She was silent. Julian barJulian spoke. "You'll have a pension, of course. Let's say—a megacred an Earth-year, as long as you keep working, plus all expenses. You'll draw your pay from any credit-comp in Mallworld, so long as you can show you're working on it. Terry is always kind to her young men. She always provides for them."

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. A million-faceted sparkling Theresa of ice, lighting the gateway to the other universe, an effulgent beacon for all our dreams . . . it was staggering. Even then I knew that I couldn't do it. I was no real artist, I was just your typical product of Babylon-5, all jargon and no vision. And yet—

For her, I would do it.

Besides, think of all the Levitol and Brevitol that money could buy. . . .

But what about the Great Glitch, you ask? And surely Theresa barJulian is not the rather drab woman described at the beginning of the story.

Patience. . . .

Work on the mausoleum began at once. I hired a crew of ice-cutters—the dirty work could not all be done by one person, with a project this large—and transmatted off to Saturn's orbit. I had to pick a spot far enough so that the ringed planet wouldn't overpower the composition, close enough to make use of it as a natural light source. It was a pain to tow so much water out, so I picked methane

ice as the base material . . . it'd worked well with the Rings, hadn't it?

In my no-longer-beat-up toyochev I now had a mini-transmat-intervoke for making real-time calls anywhere in the solar system; I had full eating, drinking, entertainment, and sleeping facilities; and I had five hundred inflatable holograms of Theresa bar Julian.

I had as yet no idea of how difficult it would be.

I studied the holograms. I studied Saturn. I studied the starless blackness until I felt, at last, the loneliness that is the human condition . . . I studied the dots that were Saturn's moons, racing across the dark. But Saturn itself—

Saturn was a monster. Saturn was stunning. Saturn dominated the endless night, haunting me, taunting me with my talentlessness. I—

The planet was huge and silent and watched me, never reproaching, as I blew up the best of the holograms to a forty-klick-long image and laid down the space-buoys that were the preliminary sketches for my Theresa's face . . . and in the back of my mind was a voice, a conscience, perhaps, telling me I was massacring a mightier work of art, I was sticking a mustache onto the Mona Lisa of ten billion years. I would swallow a pill and forget.

After about an Earth-year, a ghost of Theresa began to emerge in the blackness. Wisps of sheer silk hair. From the approach angle, I wanted it to look like she was holding Saturn itself in her arms, embracing it, a madonna and child if you like.

Now I had to begin fleshing in the ghost, and this had to be mostly my own work, not the assistants'. I would order the ice-flakes for the day, they would go shave them off wherever the nearest moon happened to be at the time, and they would affix the invisible stasis motors (a Selespridon device, this, making even our arts subject to *their* technology) and then I would go to work.

In six more months, all I had was a smile.

A smile—and a terrible, terrible hunger for oblivion. I remembered my first days in Mallworld, I remembered my first fix of Levitol and my flirtation with Brevitol, but now things were worse. I was into the stuff you had to send to Old Earth for, and my salary was starting to split at the seams. I remembered watching the addicts drift hopelessly along the sidewalks, lost in themselves. And now I was getting to be one. A zonkie.

It had been great sometimes—a dose of Brevitol and then I'd drive my car slowly along the massive lips of ice, and it would seem to take days, I would linger lovingly on every chunk of ice, every jagged

crystal, every faceted polyhedron and every sculpted snowflake, and I would dream of touching *her* lips, of kissing them and breathing warmth into their icy-stoneness. It was beautiful. Until it wore off, and then would come pain.

I was doing less and less work.

And some days I would see Saturn scowling, I would be mocked by a beauty I could never hope to equal, and I would throw in the towel and do nothing and reach for another pill and—

More and more I wandered through Mallworld, but the rush of shoppers reminded me of a dance of death. Theresa would not see me.

Eventually I found the Graffiti Globe.

This was one of Mallworld's most famous landmarks—it was rumored that if you sat down in the park around it, the whole human race would eventually pass by . . . and I passed by it often. There was this metal globe, see, about three hundred meters in diameter, and gravi-down all around it so you walk on it in any direction. The whole thing was a massive recording device. You could kneel down anywhere and vent your wit or your frustrations and the globe would retain them for a while . . . sometimes, some clown who knew how to write would even scrawl some gibberish on its shiny surface, but of course only a scholar could interpret such things. But if you wanted some fun you could lie on the Graffiti Globe and put your ear to the cold metal and hear—

A thousand layers of murmurings. Anguished laments for lost lovers. Obscenities: some humorous, some vituperative, lacing through a texture of faint filthy songs and sad songs and songs that lampooned the Selespridar . . . *Meet me at three point fourteen o'clock. Selespridon science sucks malaprop manure. I love you. Help me, help me, I—. Kinky for slinkies, will fornicate for expenses.*

A million whispers. A million souls bared naked for any stranger to hear. A million cries for help.

It was beautiful to lie there all zonked out and listen to this sussurant mourning. You could be lulled to sleep by it. You could forget your own troubles. *I did, for a while.*

And when I awoke it would be back to Saturn, back to shunting small shards of methane-ice around, switching them back and forth and knowing that they never looked right and that Father Saturn was always watching. . . .

In the end I did it.

I matted into the level of Mallworld where the Graffiti Globe was. I hadn't been able to afford my daily ration of chemicals. I jumped

up onto the Globe and found a foothold and then I yelled into it, "Help! I'm a zonkie! Get me out of this!" And I gave them my address. The cold metal kissed my lips, for a moment I imagined they were the ice-lips of my Theresa, smiling in the soft light of the huge cold beautiful planet—

A woman came to my suite at the Gaza Plaza Hotel. Her somatype spelled poverty, hard work, all the things I'd been brought up to disdain.

"Robo Ishi-Leone?" I did not like her voice. It was whiny, thin, too little-girlish for me.

"What do you want?"

"I've been sent to you. We heard your cry for help. I'm a pet store owner from level W77, but I also work as a volunteer for Zonkies Anonymous."

"How the—"

"I work as a graffiti monitor, Mr. Ishi-Leone."

I started to cry. In between bursts of incoherence the whole story came spewing out like an undigested gourmet dinner. And then I noticed that I was in her arms, and that we seemed to be . . . making love.

"What was that all about?" I said finally, settling back on the floatbed. Her technique had been deplorable, but there was something so sincere about it, unlike all the women I had known. Something I hadn't known was in me was responding to her. Perhaps it was that I was becoming a man now, and not a pampered hedonist of a kid.

"I don't know," she said. And she started crying too. It occurred to me that she wouldn't be working for Zonkies Anonymous if she hadn't been one herself, once.

"It's all right," I ventured, hugging her. She clung to me. I'd never had anyone *cling* to me before. I felt needed. It was alarming. "Got to go," I murmured quickly, and dematted before she could even tell me her name.

I was angry with myself by the time I was bursting through the buoys and into Saturn's space.

There was the planet. There were the rings, a perfect ice-sculpture, the cosmic snowman's masterpiece.

And there were the lips.

I'd betrayed them! I was unfit to finish Theresa bar Julian's mausoleum. The lips smiled their enigmatic smile; the face was outlined only, with kilometer-long streakstrands of ice, liquid methane squirted by a stunt-flier and crystalizing instantly in the cold vac-

uum. The body was vaguer still; the navel, where a temple to Theresa was to be erected, was a mere pebble-azroid of ice.

I lay down in the car's auto-life-support pod, where I usually slept, and decided it was time to take an overdose.

I reached up to the shelf where I kept my pills. Two Levitol, assorted strong stuff, not really enough even to get a good high on, and a whole cache of Brevitols. That was all. I scooped up the sachet of Brevitols and swallowed the lot.

As I sank into the trance I realized I wasn't going to die. The life-pod would see to that. I couldn't even commit suicide properly! I panicked, tried to clamber out, but pretty soon I was too dazed and glazed to worry about anything.

When I awoke, a few minutes later, my Earthtime timer informed me that a whole year had passed.

Groggily, I turned the toyochev on and circumnavigated Theresa. None of the workmen's cars were there. There were no tanks of methane, no masses of quarried ice-flakes.

I was alone, alone with Saturn and with my aborted creation.

I set the car for Mallworld. Soon I was zeroing in on it. Mallworld beckoned to me, a sliver of mirror-bright silver gleaming in the darkness. I parked and floated down the nothing tubes into the Mallworld proper. I had nothing in mind, except the vague notion of getting the crew back together and starting work again. But, faster than I could think, I was already matting into a drug palace.

As I slipped off the sidewalk a comsim buzzed up to me. "Do something for you?"

"Just let me in there!" I snarled.

"Credit check."

"Don't you know me by now?" I shouted, trying to elbow past the little flying man into the palace. He kept darting in circles around my head, and I couldn't get past. "All right, all right." I held up my thumb.

"Sorry, but your file is closed," the comsim said. He perched offensively on my shoulder.

"Whaa—"

"Oh, there's a closeout message with it. I'm instructed to give it to you. It's from Theresa barJulian." He uttered the name with great reverence. He'd probably been programmed that way.

"Go ahead," I said testily.

Incongruously, the comsim began to speak to me in *her* voice—

*Oh, my funny little snowman, I see you didn't make the grade after all. Well, there's a price for everything and you wouldn't be human*

*if you didn't know that . . . and you haven't delivered, I guess. But I'm no cruel tyrant, my dear little snowman. Anytime you want to go on with my little project, I'll reinstate the salary and I'll even admit that you're a stronger breed of human than I thought you were. But for now . . . bye! Or, as the Selespridar put it—g'meng taft psh'thoni, "may your flowers push through the recalcitrant soil of life", if that means anything to you. Theresa. Goddess of Mallworld. . . .*

"Some dame, eh?" said the comsim in his own voice.

"Get stuffed!" I screamed. I ran for a demat-booth, knocking down two clunkers with one blow.

I'd go to the Gaza Plaza, pick up my things. . . .

The woman from Zonkies Anonymous was standing in the foyer.

"They've thrown out your things," she said. "I heard you were back."

"Leave me alone." I started out of the hotel.

"But don't you understand?" We slid past some nuns of the Acrobatic Order of St. Nureyev, arabesquing and doing cartwheels as they vended bibles to passersby. "I love you! I've been waiting for you for a whole year!"

I jumped to a faster sidewalk. "You were so vulnerable, your story was so moving . . . I can help you, cure you of your zonkiness, we can work together slowly. . . ." Two animated lampshades exhorted us to light up our lives with Loyola Lipton's Luscious Lemonade.

I jumped into a booth—not quite fast enough. COME TO FIDO'S FEELIPALACE! FEATURED PRESENTATION "GAS-GUZZLING GODZILLAS OF GANYMEDE!" "We can get a nice place with plenty of breathing space for our kids, and bring them up nicely, and you can be a partner in the pet store, and—"

*What? How had we gotten to that point? Well, I was tired, dead tired. In a second we were holding hands, vrooming down a mobiustripping sidewalk past Eve's and Adam's Love Nook, past a Society for Creative Anachronism rally where Knights in antique helmets and business suits jostled from reconstructed motorcycles with deadly ancient pool cues, past simulated earthscapes and moonscapes and marscapes and starscapes, and we were kissing, I was sinking, sinking, sinking, and she was the only straw. . . .*

"What's your name?" I said at last, managing to surface through her nonstop gabbing.

"Lynnie LaBarber."

I saw her face: an unbeautiful, dumplingish face on which two raisin eyes were planted. *Oh, no!* I thought, sinking further. Desperately I tried to conjure up Theresa's face, her dazzling eyes, her

taut-arched eyebrows, her lips that I had lived with for a year and more, and I could remember nothing. Nothing. That was finished.

I knew I was never going back. The smile on the unformed face would stay there forever, probably; those stasis-motors ran on light. But I would never look on it again.

Two hours later I had thumbed a perpetuity hitch-contract with the woman with whose unflattering description I began this tale. I had hocked away my life's earnings for a couple of babies, sight unseen, and I had signed up for a course at Zonkies Anonymous. Before the year was out I had volunteered to be a Graffiti Globe monitor. . . .

Needless to say, I could not possibly have known that I had just thumbed myself into ten years of sheer hell.

Nine months passed ("I want this to seem *natural*," Lynnie told me—she was always *telling* me by the end of a week's marriage) and we took delivery of our first child, not the most trendy of models, and not from Storkways Inc. either, but nonetheless a human being of sorts. Another child followed, and another. . . .

We called them Lynx and Lionel and Lem and Lamb and Lunkette, and still she kept ordering them. One custom-made from Storkways would have out-thumbed the credit we used up any day, but I wasn't rich anymore.

I tried to see Theresa once or twice, but the comsims wouldn't give me the code. I knew she was still alive—despite her assertion that she only had a year to live—because every now and then the holovee would carry an announcement of some great philanthropic project she was contributing to. One project she seemed especially fond of was the Institute for Eternal Youth Research on Phobos.

The babies piled into our condo-azroid. Lynnie got them from mail-order, she picked them up from the Mallworld Pound for the Unwanted, she scavenged through the catalogs of orphanages and fly-by-night freeze-a-zygote outfits. And I couldn't do anything, because I'd thumbed on the dotted line. Damn it, the contract had been in writing, and who the hell can read?

We had a baby a year, packed four and five to a closet, for about ten years. I worked hard at ousting my zonkhood. I worked indefatigably at the pet store, trying to forget what I could have become. I still had some high-up friends, some of them even promised to put in a good word for me with the Goddess . . . but I was through.

I labored in the store, cleaning up after the chimpanzees, birds, gaboochis, rocks, and comsim-surrogates. I turned to my childhood



dream of being a baseball star—not much I could do about that, so instead I took to coaching little league. I needed activity, activity, activity, if I was ever to forget.

I threw myself into helping zonkies. Whenever I closed up the store I would go spend hours scouring the Graffiti Globe for messages for help. I counselled a hundred sorry characters and more, reliving my own agony as I watched their withdrawal symptoms, trying to find niches for them in the society from which they'd fled. . . .

And Mallworld, which had enthralled me and enchanted me and overloaded my senses, with whose Goddess I had once conversed almost as an equal . . . Mallword began to lose its charm for me. I hated the daily traffic jams at the gateway to our timeshare transmat, hated the way our toyochev (beat-up again, of course) had to grind and groan through to the non-shoppers' parking lot. I hated buying food by the megapellet. I hated—

The worst of it was having to vaculax the alien animals, the ones with exotic excretory habits. . . .

It wasn't me!

Well, it has been said that when one is tired of Mallworld one is tired of life.

I was tired of life.

I didn't even think of Theresa anymore. I didn't think of the lips that waited in the eternal cold and dark. I was too tired to do anything but dive into the bed, too tired even to kiss my wife, let alone . . . no wonder she wanted a sleaz-o-matic. I thumbed for one. I thumbed for a hundred things, knowing I'd probably end up in a debtor's prison or worse, because it was better than wasting my time arguing.

And then, at the lowest moment of my life, on a tedious day like a thousand other tedious days, the Great Glitch came.

It was going to be a tough day. I had to work at the store, do a round of Graffiti monitoring, and then appear promptly for a baseball game at the stadium in the earthscape park. It was the Pet Store Parakeets—which included a sizable quorum of my kids—versus the Suicide Parlor Vampires, mostly kids of the staff of The Way Out Corp, grisliest and slickest of Mallworld's self-service, meet-your-maker outfits. I wasn't looking forward to any of it.

I'd seized a sniff of caffoid snuff and driven to the transmat like a fury, cutting in front of the other commuters and provoking a chorus of snarls on the intervoke. I'd popped through the circle, raring for the mad dash to Mallworld.

Chaos! Cars were colliding in mid-space, the transmat was spitting them out and they were careening crazily around, all the lanes were scraggled into zigzags of spyrogyring toyochevs. . . .

"What the—" I stabbed my intervoke into general reception, hoping someone would tell me what was happening. But all I could make out was a cacophony of imaginative cussing. Traffic's always reasonably smooth in space—how can it not be? How in Buddha's name—

And then I peered over to where Mallworld should have been hanging, a silvery stub of light suspended in the darkness, and what I saw made me jump clear out of my monomolecular underwear.

There were—

There were two *Mallworlds*!

Two cylinders of mirror-gleaming metal! Two sets of klicklong pendants that streamed out stiffly with welcoming messages for people who could read!

And, ahead of me, hornets' nests of cars, exploding out of duplicate transmats, like a wilderness of colliding galaxies. . . .

I finally fought my way through. Now, which Mallworld was I supposed to go to?

It finally dawned on me. They weren't quite the same. Here a

crinkle in a pendant, here a parking satellite set at a slightly different angle . . . it only took a moment to ascertain which Mallworld was my Mallworld, and soon I was parked and drifting down the forcecubes.

*Some publicity stunt*, I was thinking as I popped out of a demat-booth and matted into the store. I snapped at a couple of mini-clunkers; they scurried obediently away and began sweeping the floor. I looked up and was rewarded by a bowel movement in the eye. I waved frantically at the miscreant parakeet, a pedigree two-headed model and spoiled rotten, trying to aim it at the waiting forcecage which Lynnie was valiantly brandishing.

"Quick!" I shouted. "This way—whoops!" and I was banana-peeling across the floor. I crashed against a monkey cage and stubbed my toe on a pet pumice.

"How do you like the new Mallworld?" Lynnie said, as she expertly scooped the bird and assorted droppings into the forcecage and plonked the whole operation beside a giant beehive.

"Confusing," I said. "Whose idea of a commercial is that? I guess it must be the barJulians'; they're the only people who could afford such a thing."

"Oh, no," said Lynnie, absently helping one of our kids, Lynx I think, into his laseball uniform and sending him out with a smack on the bottom. "It's nothing to do with *them*. It's the Selespridar. They—er—goofed."

"The *Selespridar*?"

"Uh huh . . . I heard it on the store holovee. It's a real-live emergency, and they pre-empted all the soap operas and everything! Klutharion was explaining it himself! He said that . . . the Selespridon force-mechanism, I mean the one that holds us in our pocket universe, is a very delicate device. He said, there's jillions and cumquatmafrillions of universes, parallel universes, you know—"

"Science fiction," I muttered.

"Klutharion didn't seem to think so. Anyway, there's been a . . . slippage of some kind . . . two parallel universes are intersecting. Anyhow, Klutharion said that sometimes . . . those *other* universes . . . aren't exactly *empty*, you know? Sometimes they're populated. And anyway, this one was, and our Selespridar are negotiating with *their* Selespridar right now to fix the breach. It's only about a megacubiklick of overlap, really it's nothing to worry about, and we're not supposed to go to the other Mallworld or worry about it or even think of it as being there, and it's only for a day or so anyway, until they sew up the fabric of the universe again."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. A big-time commercial would have been worth watching. But this was something that was none of our business, that was strictly between the Selespridar. So today would be business as usual. I couldn't possibly hope for the baseball game being cancelled or something.

"Oh, and another impression I got—" Lynnie said, sidling up for an obligatory kiss. I obliged perfunctorily.

"What?" A customer had come in, and I wanted to wriggle out of Lynnie's overwhelming embrace, even if only to vend a white mouse or a lump of granite.

"I kind of got the impression that *our* Selespridar don't think very much of *their* Selespridar."

"Oh." I struggled free and went to the customer's aid.

Ten hours later I'd completely forgotten about the Great Glitch. I'd spent two hours listening to a theological argument between two high priestesses about whether or not buying a pet snake would violate their vows of chastity; I'd explained the feeding habits of sharks at some length to a faded flapper who wanted a novelty for her jacuzzi; I'd chased a Fomalhautan snotwort half-way down a sidewalk; and I'd sold a pet shale, a mouse, and a bag of birdseed. Lynnie had left long ago to prepare the kids for the big game; I closed up and set off for the Graffiti Globe with some relief.

Action was hot there today. I guess the dual Mallworld thing had really stirred up the deep-seated urges of people to compose hideous doggerel. I sprang up onto the globe, held out my amp-ferret, and listened. In the inane pun department, "I mall doubled up" seemed to be in the lead, followed closely by "a Mall two far." I tried to ignore these feeble witticisms as I hunted for messages from zonkies.

They were crawling all over the globe, like slugs, like caterpillars. The bedlam from my amp was incredible. It was like getting high all over again. I stumbled about, not paying much attention, and then I tripped over an old man in a nightgown and mitre.

"Of all the—" he began.

"Sorry, already!" My nose hurt. I started to get to my feet when I heard—

"Robo Ishi-Leone. Robo Ishi-Leone. If you hear this, for God's sake meet me outside the pet store at ten point oh, as close as you can make it . . . I beg you! I—"

It broke off. I think it was sobbing.

That voice! Suddenly, irrelevantly, an image of Theresa flashed through my mind. I knew this man's voice and I knew it had something to do with *her*. But how?

I got up. Only five minutes to ten point oh. I had to hurry.

I ran to the demat-booth and yelled the level number.

I leapt onto the fastest sidewalk.

By the time I rounded the corner, I knew who would be standing there. And it was.

I saw his face, swimmingly, through a haze of frantic human faces. He smiled a wan smile. I elbowed my way through the mass of jabbering shoppers.

It was true. There he was. He must have broken the Selespridon injunction, made it over to *my* Mallworld.

I smiled at Robo Ishi-Leone. I smiled at *me*.

"Come on in," I said, trying not to look flustered. But he had already thumbed the lock with nary a peep from the burglar-bugle. I followed him into his—our—store.

"Much the same, is it?" I said. He nodded.

His face was just like mine, and yet . . . there was a defeatedness about him which I didn't think I had. He hung his head and shuffled around, uneasy. *My God*, I thought, *is this how I look to other people?* "Sit," I said, motioning to a chairfloat. But he'd already found it and was already sitting. Of course. It stood to reason that we'd think much alike.

"So how's the store?" I said. He had sprung out of the chairfloat and was wandering from cage to cage, stopping now and then to mop and wipe. He seemed a lot more diligent than me. "Nervous, huh?" I said.

"Aren't you?" he said, scrubbing away.

What the hell do you say to yourself? "Coming to the game?" I trotted over to our laseball shelf—being a pet store, we were able to breed our own versions of the photosynthesizing quasi-sentient alien beings, originally imported by the Selespridar as a gourmet delicacy—and selected a half dozen or so, making sure they were completely covered with sleek green fur and testing each of them with a little lase-goad to make sure they flew true.

"What game?" the other Robbie said, ducking as one of the laseballs went askew. It missed him and careened into a bundle of little pet granites.

So the two universes weren't exactly alike, then. "The kids. You know. Laseball. Pow, pow, ping, ping? Parakeets versus Vampires today." He nodded confusedly. "You don't have kids?"

"They're . . . away." Something about the way he said it, I couldn't quite put my finger on it—

"Planning to stay for a while?"

"Don't know."

"You're very laconic, you know that?"

"Yah."

"Why are you scrubbing everything? It's not even your store."

"Habit, I guess."

"Doesn't your wife help out? Lynnie, I mean."

"You have Lynnie? She isn't . . . away?"

Again the funny way he said it, fearful and with a half-sob thrown in . . . "No," I said. "I have her all right. Although you know as well as I do that we'd be better off without her . . ." At last, someone who would understand. I wondered if he still saw Theresa, but I felt too embarrassed to ask yet.

We stood awkwardly for a few moments, listening to the chittering of the monkeys and the eerie, passionate outgribing from the gabooshi cage. Then I said, "Hey, Robo—"

He reached out to touch me, then. "Are you real?" he whispered. He looked like he was on the verge of crying.

"For God's sake," I cried, "what's the problem, huh? You can talk to *me*. I understand, don't I? I mean, are you still on the stuff or something, is Theresa bugging you still? Let me tell you, Robbie, snap out of it, cope, feed the kids, look on the bright side—" I didn't feel that great myself, but I had to say something. I mean, this was *me* out there, and maybe wading through a worse existence even than mine. . . .

"Come on. First you visit here awhile, then I'll go over and visit you awhile. Okay?"

"You don't want to visit me."

Something was wrong. But I knew me well. I knew I was too proud and bullheaded to come right out, so I decided to watch him and see. "Here, catch," I said, and tossed him a baseball. He caught it neatly with an elegant wrist-twist.

I locked up again, we meandered up a coil spring corridor up to H56 (for the exercise) and then dematted to the Earthscape Park. There was a Little League sized laseball field there, nestled nicely between the Sphynx and the Taj Mahal. I saw that the circular field had already been set in motion, that a few parents and relatives were already installed on hoverbleachers that stretched all the way up to the Eiffel Tower (with also served as an Umpire's control box).

The Vampires were out in force. Crisp black cloaks covered their mirror-coated leotards, and exaggerated fangs of flash-polished metal protruded from their mouths.

I raced over to our stand, with Robo Two frisking behind. Already he seemed happier. I reached the enclosure and shouted, "The fangs! Who passed them? They're an extra light-deflector! They're out to cheat us again!" They shrugged. I added, "By the way, this is Robo Two, from the other Mallworld." They shrugged some more.

Robo Two looked at the kids and stared and stared and stared, and then he looked at Lynnie and got all lump-in-the-throaty. I thought he was going to cry again.

Clearly they were gonig to win. With Federico barJulian as their sponsor, how could the Vampires lose? There wasn't even any point in playing. I saw three of my kids scrambling into their reflective tights, balancing their mirror-disks from hand to hand, and trying out their fingerlasers (all with appropriate sound-effects—*theirs* emitted great electronic wolf-howls, ours squawked in twelve-part harmony). The Vampires were strutting about outside, testing the spin of the field by cartwheeling and somersaulting this way and that. Great strands of colored gas where the lasers had burned through lingered in the specially treated air.

Above, the bases were being lowered into position; for the kids they had to be low enough to spring onto from a rotating playing field, yet high enough for them to show off their acrobatics for a few extra decimals.

I helped Lynx, who pitched, strap the fingerlasers onto his index fingers, and whispered some half-hearted words of encouragement ("Don't even *try* to outsmart the speed of light. Set up a phalanx in the outfield. You all aim for the ball at once, use your cyberinputs, don't rely on your eyes.") to my team, adjusted the decorative parakeet wings on a couple of the younger kids, gave Lynnie another obligatory peck on the nose, and then sank back into a chairfloat, subvoked for vibromassage, and prepared to fall asleep.

And meanwhile Robo Two was gazing with such longing at the kids and at my wife. . . .

The Parakeets were up. A chorus of hisses went up from the hired claque on the hoverbleachers.

And they were off! A ball flew, a burst of ruby red laser light spurted from Lem, twisting his lithe little body and setting off the ball's laser-sensitive photosynthesizing device, so that it shot off an explosive jetstream of oxygen and by-products and soared off towards short stop! A Vampire sent out a bright blue lightbeam, but it bounced off the stadium's mirrorwalls with a zingingwhoosh of sound effects! The ball was whirling now; a dozen Vampires charged, trying to outguess the lightshaft, trying to change the ball's vectors;

but the momentum shifted the field and made it spin madly; and Lem made a dash for the base, doing a neat cartwheel onto where it was, but no! The bases whirled away, and a back-hand-spring later he found himself backing right into third! Just as the lightbeam came reflecting back and missing him by a couple of centimeters. The field spun to a halt and I saw Lem crowing nastily at the nearest Vampire, who kicked him in the shin and sent him sprawling to the base's railing. The bleach-boys were booing now. We'd lucked into a good first move. Third base was a good fractional of a homerun, and he hadn't been hit by ball or laser, so there were no penalty decimals, and he must've gotten at least a 3 for elegance. Sure enough, the announcer said "Four point oh seven two runs." Somehow I didn't think it would last.

Suddenly I became aware of a raucous cheering, in a voice horribly similar to my own—

Robo Two was out there at the field's edge, dancing and waving and making an idiot of himself! I shrank a little further into my chairfloat, and turned up the massage to maximum, hoping I'd get pounded into oblivion and not have to get embarrassed to death.

They were off again! And there was Robo, yelling encouragement and harping on every homer. At the end of the first dozen innings (half an hour later) the air was thick with the tangle of angular burn-lines and you could hardly see. Three balls had died and Robo Two insisted on a ceremony. "But nobody does that anymore!" I protested weakly, but the team shouted me down. It occurred to me that my double was a little better at appearing to be in tune with the spirit of the game than I was. . . .

Now it was time for Lynx to pitch, and he always liked to do it standing on his head. You could double your team's score that way if you were good, but Lynx was all arms and legs and looked sort of like a post-coital, pre-prandial male spider. He always miscalculated the angular momentum of his headstands and made the playing field spin the wrong way, too. I retreated a little further. What I wouldn't give for a Levitol now—

But there was Robo Two, screaming advice, and what do you know?

The Vampire struck out!

And in the end we only lost by 2.78 runs! And afterwards, the kids crowded around Robo Two and hugged him and made much of him, and they even started hauling him around on their shoulders and dragging him through the park, crashing into the Venus de Milo and slashing a gash in the hundred-meter scale model of the Mona

Lisa and then the Park Police were there, clanking after them. . . .

Afterwards (I had to post bond on the kids—another kilocred down the drain) my alter-ego and I strolled back to the store by ourselves. I was grumbling bitterly, and my other self was happier than I'd ever seen him.

"You're so lucky, Robbie!" he said. There was so much wistfulness in his voice.

"As far as I'm concerned," I said, "you can have it all."

"You mean it?"

"What?"

"That I could . . . change places with you? No, you don't mean it, you couldn't possibly mean it if you really knew what you were saying. . . ."

"Take the damn lot of them!" I shouted, really angry now. Or was I jealous, because they'd clustered around him and not me? "I don't want any of them! I want to turn the clock back, I want to be a snowman again and finish my ice-sculpture and—"

So I'd said it. After all those years.

Damn it, it was true! I'd never dared admit it aloud to myself.

And suddenly I saw those lips in my mind, those lips of ice . . . could it really have been so many years?

"You haven't finished it?" he asked me, wonderingly.

"You have?" He didn't have to answer. He must have done it! Which meant that in his universe, he must be in with Theresa bar Julian, he must be up to his neck in megacredits—

"I'll take it!" I said. "There's nothing for me here except debts and an unattractive wife and a dozen uneugenic brats. I'll change places with you! No one need even know. . . ."

And then a terrible sadness came over him. We had just passed a funeral home ("We'll give you everything you missed in life") and a minimalist store that supplied automated utensils and life supports for those chic floating heads on silver platters—that wasn't an exclusive somatype for the well-heeled anymore, anyone could get a cut-rate somatectomy for a song—a couple of them were hovering outside, window-shopping, handle in handle. Perhaps that was why he was depressed, I was thinking, so I hurried on. But he still wouldn't come out of his mood.

Finally I said, "What is it? Aren't you happy?"

"You're *me!*" he screamed. "How could I even have thought of . . . taking all this away from you? You've got everything! And you're tempting me so much . . . you don't know what you're getting into! Just leave me alone, Robbie, just leave me alone!"

"Please," I said, "let me be the judge of that. . . ."

Theresa barJulian, straddling the universe in all her glory! Madonna's knickers, I wanted to see it. I had to see it. I had to see what I would have done if. . . .

"Leave me alone!" he shouted again.

"Okay, already," I said. And to think that I could have escaped from that punitive marriage contract . . . "But look, a deal's a deal, huh? I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

"Okay," he said sullenly.

We were in his toyochev, and we were off, thrusting towards the second Mallworld. His car was just like mine; here a different dust-speck, maybe, there a different rip in the padding . . . but there was one enormous difference.

In the front of the driver's console, where you'd normally order your food and drink, stood a row of miniature holograms.

Lynn and Lynx and Lem and Lionel and Lamb and Lucifer and Laurina and Lunkette and a couple others I wasn't sure I could identify. In solemn, muggish postures, not smiling, completely blank-looking. As though their souls had been stolen.

I didn't want to be rude, so I said, "Nice pix, Robbie."

He laughed hollowly. "Come on," he said, "don't rub it in, Robbie . . . they gave them to me, those filthy stinking bastards, just before my family went . . . away . . . don't you understand?"

"Who, Rob?" I was bewildered now. "What stinking bastards?"

"Oh, you're just mocking me!" I could see that he was on the verge of breaking down again, so I didn't pursue it.

"Hey, that ice-sculpture of ours—yours, I mean—must be quite something, huh?"

"Sure," he said. He didn't sound too convincing.

We had reached the space of the other Mallworld now. A few transmat-signs circled the Mall, and I realized suddenly that we could mat right out of there and be in *his* universe completely and when they stitched up the breach nobody would be the wiser.

On impulse I said, "Look, I know what Mallworld looks like. You don't have to show me. We have the condo, right? You have it all to yourself here, don't you? That's fine. I'll take it, I'll take it—"

He couldn't meet my eyes. "All right," he said.

"But now I want to see the ice sculpture! I want to see Theresa barJulian with my own eyes!"

We zeroed in on the ring of buoys; Robo Two subvoked a few instructions to his car, thumbed a creditcomp, and then said, "Who's

Theresa barJulian?"

I gulped. "But—"

And then I realized that he had never once mentioned her name. That I had *assumed* our lives had been pretty much the same, that the same emotions had motivated us. I had blithely discussed "our" ice-sculpture while assuming the whole time that it was the same one.

Well, this might be even more interesting . . . to see who *his* Immortal Mistress of the Gateway might be . . . to see if our taste in women coincided . . . and then maybe it *was* her, and she just had a different name in this universe or something.

We burst out into another region of space. We had left my universe behind now. And then I saw—

I choked. "You've got the—the—"

All around me, uncountable, Christmas-tree-glittering in the darkness. . . .

"The stars," he said. The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable.

But now I was lost in the wonder of it. The stardome of the Galaxy Palace in Mallworld was nothing to this. This was—

I felt like I'd been fettered all my life and now I'd been freed. I was drunk on the glory of it. My vision, stopped by cage-walls 19 A.U.'s across, was touching infinity now. If I'd seen this before, when I was a kid, I think I could have finished the ice-sculpture. It was like waking from a dream.

For the first time I understood how men had gone crazy with having lost the stars, how there'd been suicidal riots during the first days of the Selespridar, and how even after they showed how completely benign they were, we still had to struggle to live with our grief, our loss. . . .

I must have been silent for a long time. I closed and reopened my eyes and they were still there. Like a cosmic crystal shattered into shards and blown out over the darkness. I don't think even the worst metahallucinizers I took ever matched the grandeur of this. . . .

"Robbie, Robbie, come out of it!" my alter ego was whispering.

The car turned. Ahead was Saturn, a different Saturn from mine, for his Saturn floated in a glorious star-stitched darkness. The stars softened things, made the rings and the moons smile. And then I saw the ice-sculpture. It was not Theresa barJulian.

It was an image of a Selespridon.

"What?" I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Klutharion." So the two human races had the same governor. "He forced me to build this . . . monument to his arrogance! He

bribed me with a promise that my family would never be taken—away, but he didn't lift a finger to help me when the draft came!"

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What do you mean, *away*?" He pointed wildly outward. At the stars. "You mean . . . humans travel freely to the stars? I'd give anything to be here! Let's trade places now, before your change your mind!"

Robo Two laughed again. It was the laughter of someone who's signed an irreversible-death contract with The Way Out Corp. He didn't answer me, but gave the car new instructions. We were in for a grand tour of Saturn.

I saw a whole moon, carved into the face of a Selespridon. I saw huge marble asteroids chiselled into Selespridar figures, blue-faced, magenta-haired like *our* Selespridar and yet somehow—menacing looking.

Skimming the surface of a scarred azroid, I saw an environmental bubble under which humans were toiling, chiselling, drilling, and I could see a Selespridon face already beginning to emerge.

"He loves monuments to himself," said my double. "He thinks we'll worship him if he builds enough of them. . . ."

We rounded the planet and I saw something that took my breath away.

Someone had been sculpting the cloud layer, working in dyes of different colors, and there was an ghostly image, in tints of red and brown and yellow, etched upon the other face of Saturn.

The image showed a Selespridon. He was laughing savagely, it seemed—although their emotions often seem inscrutable to humans—but there was no question about what he was doing.

He was wielding a whip, and a human was cowering beneath him. The Rings, the beautiful Rings, separated them.

It was an image of utter brutality, an image of a fear hidden so deep down in the psyche of civilized people, and yet so unmistakably clear. . . .

"Slaves," I whispered.

My double showed me first his right thumb, his credit-thumb that he'd used to unlock my store. Then he showed me his other thumb. Inscribed in the center whorl—I had to strain to see it—was a squiggly symbol. "It's a draft-mark," he said.

I closed my eyes tight, trying to squeeze the stars out of the sky.

He told me more. In *our* universe, the Selespridar are, by and large, a kindly race; they are masters of the galaxy and so on, but mostly they are enlightened and they spend a lot of time babysitting immature cultures like ours—"until such time as mankind achieves

enough maturity to become acceptable to the galactic community," as they put it.

In his universe, the Selespridar had achieved galactic mastery through the slave trade.

Yes, they'd brought prosperity to humans. At a price. The price was the slave-draft, an annual culling of the human race for the labor markets of a jaded, cruel galaxy. And the humans, given no choice, had acceded. Even thrived, after a fashion, endeavoring with all their hearts to forget their friends and relatives who had gone . . . away.

To the stars about which all men dream.

They had the dream all right. They were human beings after all. But their dream was a nightmare.

I felt outrage burning inside me. I wanted to break the neck of one of them. "You're staying with me," I said. Then, "I could have been you!" I voiced my deepest terror at last. "I can't let you stay here—"

"Perhaps," he said then, "I should show you one final thing." He made the car drift back to the ice-sculpture.

"I don't want to look at it again!" I cried. To no avail.

Ahead, glowing softly in Saturn's light, stood the Enemy. Twenty klicks tall—almost as big as the whole Mallworld—its thin lips twisted and evil, its eyes glittering with blue fire. Its arms were outstretched, yes, clasping Saturn, just the way I had planned to make the statue of Theresa. But here it looked obscene.

"Take me away," I said. "I've had enough."

"No." We were diving straight into the statue. Soon we were deep inside it, the car dodging the larger ice-flakes and heading straight into the statue's chest. I had to admire Robo's technique. It must have taken him ten years to build this thing.

Jagged ice-chunks turned and churned here, center of a slow whirlpool that scattered the available light and fractured it and made the Selespridon's tunic glisten with rainbow colors. We were flying through the hurricane's eye, a tunnel in the statue's guts. . . .

And then we stopped. There was a heart-shaped piece of ice, a hundred meters maybe, big enough to stand on and walk around a little.

"They haven't found out about this yet," Robo Two said. "When they do—" He made a throat-slitting gesture.

I hesitated. "I've got a p-suit in the back," he said. "Only one. You'll have to go out by yourself."

For a wild moment I thought it was some kind of trick—to

abandon me here in mid-sculpture and rush home and abscond with the wife and kids—

I controlled myself. I was getting paranoid, what with having found out the truth about their world. I slipped into the suit and airlocked onto the mini-azroid of ice.

What did he want me to do? I saw his face from the car. He signed me to go ahead. And then I saw—

Etched on the Selespridon's heart, about fifty meters in diameter, was a baseball field. And the Pet Store Parakeets were playing. Each one was a perfectly carved piece of ice with his own little stasis-motor. Little hairstrands of ice showed the laserbursts, and a miniature snowball hovered in stasis above the field. . . .

The other team was a bunch of Selespridar. Big, mean, fiery-eyed and Goliath-like.

And my children were creaming the baloney out of them.

They seemed to be using deadly lasers, not the toy ones in the game. Selespridar were tumbling off the hoverbleachers. The big, mean players in the game were running scared, ten or more of them huddled inside a single base. And, in the enclosure, there was Robo Ishi-Leone, in the arms of his loving wife, laughing his brains out. . . .

And then I understood—

How men were always going to fight back, in little ways when there are no big ways left, just for the joy of being human. My universe had it a million times better than his. And still, oppressed beyond belief, driven into slavery, given the stars and yet denied their freedom, the people of his universe were still my people. Still humans.

Forced into building a hubristic monument to his hated masters, Robo Two had risked death to leave a message, to thumb his nose at the masters, to show his love for his family.

I was proud of him. I was proud that he was *me*.

I watched the laseball game with the figures cold and crystalline, frozen in time, and there were tears in my eyes. I couldn't help myself. I stood there, frozen in time myself, a sculpture of ice myself, until my tears had blinded me altogether.

Later, in the car, I said, "Run away. Come back, be with us. The kids love you, Lynnie will go ape over having two identical husbands. . . ."

We set the car's controls and sped straight to the transmat. My heart was pounding when we reached it, popped into Mallword, saw with relief that *my* world was still there—

And then, half-way to home, we turned and we saw *his* Mallworld pop out of existence. Snuffed out.

We were alone together, surrounded by impenetrable starless blackness, weeping for joy.

The official refugee count was 26. Maybe there were more. I doubt that any of us defected to their side though. Unless they'd driven out, seen the stars, gone wild, hadn't been told in time . . .

Apparently such anomalies occur fairly often—every dozen years or so—but so far they'd always been very tiny, they'd always happened in some area of empty space, and we'd always had the good fortune to intersect with an unpopulated universe.

After Robo Two was settled in a few weeks—it was good to have an extra hand in the store, and the kids doted on him, and we all had a lot of fun in bed, even without the sleaz-o-matic that the credit-sharks found it necessary to remove—I found myself wondering how we'd ever survived without him. To my surprise, I found that I was growing to love Lynnie and the kids a great deal. It had taken a chilling dystopia to show me this love. And yet—

I still had some unfinished business.

One day I strode out of the store, summoned a comsim and instructed it to send a message to Theresa barJulian. I would resume work on the mausoleum immediately, and requested that my salary be restored.

Inflation had taken its toll, but a megacred a year was still a small fortune. As soon as word came, I and the other I set out to my old hunting ground.

And there it was. The lips still hovered, half-parted in an almost-smile. They tell me that, among lonely miners at the universe's edge, legends had sprung up about those lips.

But they were not Theresa's lips anymore. I remembered nothing of her. They were just the lips of a woman.

We set to work. In a few days the place was crawling with workmen again. It was almost like the old days, except that there were two of me giving the orders. And then, one day, when the torso was taking shape and the eyes had already been kindled and some of the hair strands had been set in motion, so that they swirled gracefully about her nude body, Theresa came for a visit.

No golden galleon this time. This time it was a silver zeppelin, with a palatial reception hall and a monster of a hovering swimming pool graced by a school of live dolphins.

Theresa barJulian drifted towards me. I was shocked. She had

become a minimalist. Her head—the hair still flowed everywhere, like an Empress's train—rested on a golden life-support platter inlaid with bas-reliefs highlighted with iridium.

I and I were standing by the pool's edge when she came. The platter flitted back and forth between us, and she laughed, a silvery, musical laugh. She was as beautiful as ever.

But this wasn't our Theresa.

Our Theresa will not be any woman. She will be the soul of the human race, poised at the gateway to the future.

"My little snowman, darling," she murmured. "You've split in two!"

"Yes," I said.

"And you *are* finishing my little project for me, after all. What a charming diversion. Oh," she added, "I suppose I wasn't in this soma when we last met . . . they tell me you live ever so much longer with all the prostheses, and it's so much more *severe* and *classical*, isn't it, to be a severed head? Think of all those ancient busts. . . ."

And then I realized that, for all her wealth, she was a pitiable creature, bored to distraction with her existence and yet too much in love with life to give it up. I said, "You'll like it, Theresa. It'll remind you of what you used to look like. . . ."

"Ah, human vanity!" she said. "Far better to relinquish our hold on the karmic universe, no?" She spouted a few more of the platitudinous wisdoms of some fashionable sect. I listened politely, wanting to get away.

And then she said, "You still believe in true love, little snowman? Are you still doing this just for me?" Her mind seemed to wander a little, as though she were reliving the scene at the party, so long ago, when I had made such an ass of myself. . . .

"No," I said. "It's not for you anymore."

I was thinking of the little tableau I was constructing within the statue, engraved upon its heart.

Yes, sculpted in miniature on the cold heart of our Madonna of the Gateway, a little picture of little Lynx beanning Klutharion with a baseball. And other assorted asides.

*And when we're all dead, I thought, I and I and Lynnie and all the kids will still be laughing and lording it over the space lords, slugging the snot out of the Selespridar.*

"Oh? Who is it for, then, snowman?"

"The human race."

"Posterity!" she hooted with laughter. "Vanity, vanity, my little children!"

"You wouldn't understand."

No.

She was senile now, drained of everything, pathetic. But I could not hate her. For I was full of life and I had people to love and statements to make. . . .

I winked at my partner—snowman to snowman—and then we turned our backs on her and made for the demat-booth, not looking back.



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# THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

It's WorldCon time again, and even the weeks following it are filled with SF con(vention)s. Enjoy a social weekend with your favorite authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. The hotline is (703) 273-6111. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number and I'll call back at my expense. Tell me about cons 5 months ahead (address/phone above) for free listings. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge in Denver.

BuboniCon. For info, write: 429 Graceland SE, Albuquerque NM 87108. Or phone: (505) 265-2787 (1D am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Albuquerque NM (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 28-30 Aug., 1981. Guests will include: Roger Zelazny, Gordon Garb. This and DeepSouthCon are traditional warmups for the WorldCon.

B'hamaCon, Box 57031, Birmingham AL 35259. (205) 252-4515. 28-30 Aug. Bob Shaw, Gerald Page, Hank Reinhardt. The 19th annual DeepSouthCon. 24-hour party room, Hearts tourney.

HillCon, c/o Zee, Sneeuwgans 6, 3435 OK Nieuwegein, The Netherlands. Rotterdam, 28-30 Aug. Jack Vance, Kate Wilhelm, Peter Coene, Gerard Suurmeyer. The eighth annual BeNeLuxCon.

DenverCon II, (303) 433-9774. 3-7 Sep. C. L. Moore, Clifford Simak, Rusty Hevelin, Ed Bryant. This is it: WorldCon 1981. Join at the door for \$55. At the Denver Hilton.

DunOraClone, 386 Alcatraz, Oakland CA 94618. 4-7 Sep. If you prefer games to the WorldCon. EarthCon, c/o Gloger, Box 22041, Beachwood OH 44122. Cleveland DH, 18-20 Sep. Lichtenberg.

TriCitiCon, Box 2000 SUNY, Binghamton NY 13901. 18-20 Sep. G. Zebrowski, Freff, P. Sargent. CoCon, Box 400, Bronx NY 10471. Danbury CT, 25-27 Sep. No guests—just a relaxed weekend.

BabelCon, c/o Harrison, 1355 Cornell St. SE, Grand Rapids MI 49506. 25-27 Sep. Costumes. ImagiCon, c/o Collins, 1257 N. Parkway #3, Memphis TN 38104. 25-27 Sep. Andrew J. Offutt, Arthur Hlavaty. A "semi-relaxacon" follow-on to 1980's JustimagiCon. 24-hour party room.

MosCon, Box 9141, Moscow ID 83843. 25-27 Sep. Kate Wilhelm, Tim Kirk, Damon Knight, Suzie Tompkins. The first 150 members will get a Tim Kirk print. The third annual con hers.

ConClave, c/o Waldo and Magic Inc., Box 444, Ypsilanti MI 48197. Detroit MI, 2-4 Oct. John Varley, Jon and Joni Stopa. The sixth annual edition, in the intimate Midwest tradition.

ReVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400. Roanoke VA, 2-4 Oct. Algis Budrys, Alice Sheldon ("James Tiptree Jr."), Kelly Freas. Scholarships awarded, costume competition.

NonCon, Box 475, Sta. G, Calgary, Alta., Canada. 9-11 Oct. Larry Niven, Orson Scott Card. StarCon, Box 3096, Lubbock TX 79452. (806) 747-0669. 9-11 Oct. Robert ("Bug Wars") Asprin.

Worlds Beyond, Box 4042, Falls Church VA 22044. Tysons Corner VA (near Washington DC), 10-12 Oct. Mike Jittlov, Steve Stiles, A. D. Foster. Jittlov's animated films must be seen.

World Fantasy Con, c/o Dark Carnival Books, 2012 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley CA 94705. (415) 845-7757. 3D Oct.-1 Nov., 1981. The big Halloween con for fans of fantasy and horror.

WesterCon 35, Box 11644, Phoenix AZ 85064. (602) 249-2616. 2-5 Jul., 1982. Gordon Dickson.

ChiCon IV, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690. 2-6 Sep., 1982. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 WorldCon. Go to other cons to prepare for WorldCons.

## LETTERS

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*Most of you have been very good about keeping track of our various mailing addresses (for subscriptions: Box 1933, Marion OH 43306; for manuscript submissions and letters to the editor: Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101; for everything else: 380 Lexington Avenue, New York NY 10017), and for this we are grateful. We are even more grateful that you are using these addresses—to subscribe, to send us the manuscripts we must have to publish, and to tell us how we're doing—not only in the matter of editorial content, but also in the important matter of how well we're reaching your local newsstand. Please: keep it up!*

*The other day (well, 8 April 1981), we checked through the most recent batch of rejected manuscripts to see just why we have been returning stories. Of the sample of 197, we classified 68 as "DNC" (for Does Not Convince); this covers unconvincing characters, dialog, science, setting, and so on. We classified 57 as depending on an old and overworked idea (but only 5 of these were routine visiting extraterrestrials or UFOs). There were 25 stories simply listed as "bad" (or worse). And 28 were pointless, 21 were murky (that is, hard to follow), 16 were slow-moving or tedious, 16 were too long for the idea (these last two are very similar faults), and 12 simply revealed a wonder without telling a story about it. As for the ones that were good enough to buy—watch these pages: we bought them—and with pleasure. Finding good stories (and helping writers to fix up almost-good-enough ones) is what keeps us going.*

—George H. Scithers

Dear Doctor Asimov:

I enjoy your monthly column, sir, but wish to disagree with your piece in March's issue and your views on poetry. Yes, it's true that there are poets who don't make a lot of sense, but so many fiction writers perpetrate the same offence. I have heard some strange opinions, and the strangest ones are those that purport to prove that poetry's inferior to prose. I agree that writing fiction is a complicated skill, but to write successful poetry is even harder still! Now a fiction work is boring, weak, and dull unless it's got things like narrative and character and (most of all) a plot; fiction writers must know grammar, punctuation, form, and tense . . . and the actions of the characters should make dramatic sense, and you *must* be entertain-

ing or your tale's not worth a dime. But a poet must do all of the above . . . AND ALSO *RHYME!* There are certain forms of poetry—like tanka or haiku—that describe a static scene and then that's all they ever do. But the modern type of poet writing *modern* verses knows that the work must tell a story and have action (just like prose) and it has to have a plot that entertains you every time. What I mean is, it's a *story* . . . but the story has to *RHYME!*

Well, I'd rather not pack entire pages this way.

Fondly,

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre  
London, U.K.

*I agree with you. After all I am a limericist and know what it is to be victimized by rhyme. But so much modern poetry doesn't rhyme. It may still be very difficult to write—but not because of the rhyme.*

—Isaac Asimov

*How about a letter to the editor—in rhyme—such as this one?*

—Shawna McCarthy

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers,

First of all, may I compliment you on your new cover format. It is quite alive and projects a futuristic feel. Please, just try to design a place for the mailing label.

We have been enjoying your publication for over two years and are pleased to see SF on the increase as a recognized literature.

With television on a rapid decline, magazines such as this are one of the only forms of relaxation that are not strenuous, expensive, and fattening. Thank you very much for producing something for an adult mind that is not assaulting our intelligence with pointless sex and violence.

Enclosed you will find a stamped self-addressed envelope (with the new postage rate, the government has raised the rent for storing our mail) and request information sheets on manuscripts. [Done!]

Yours in appreciation,

Laura M. Bradley  
Groton CT

*Ah, if we could but design a place for the mailing label—and another place for that computerized stripe pattern (preferably on some other magazine).*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Sir. The new issue—April 13, 1981—arrived in the mail the other day and I'd like to say that it had, in my opinion, the worst cover I have ever seen the magazine carry. Please go back to the old logo.

Once I got past the cover, I found "The House of If" by Barry B. Longyear, "Twitch on the Bull Run" by Sharon Webb, and "Improbable Bestiary: The Unicorn" by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre all excellent.

That's it. Thank you for taking the time and trouble to read my letter. I remain

Sincerely yours,

Joseph E. May, Jr.  
Sanford FL

*If there's one thing a science fiction reader should be able to take, it's change. Just give yourself a chance. Get used to the novelty and then let us hear from you again.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov:

It seems, to myself, that I am growing old when I can say "I remember when the Good Doctor's magazine was first circulated." I realize this was but a few short years ago; yet, when I think back on all the science fiction I've read (including several years before the advent of your publication), I amaze myself. But that's not why I've written this letter. I'm here to boost your ego (no insult intended).

Admittedly, until your issue of February 16, 1981 I avoided your magazine like the plague. I have always more enjoyed stories labelled "new-wave science fiction" or "speculative fiction." To me, you (and, I assumed, your magazine) have always represented catchy notions with junior space cadets. But this last month I bought a copy of your magazine because I realized that my habits had grown. I needed a larger fix. I shot up some *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, some *Analog*, and finally some of your magazine.

I was surprised (and pleased) to find that your magazine contained the best story I'd read all month. It was a short piece called "Balancing Act" by F. M. Busby. This is the quality science fiction I really enjoy. (Unfortunately, when I think back on the story, I have to force myself to disregard the last few lines. To me, and to my contemporaries, those last lines were unnecessary—with a capital "U".)

I also greatly enjoyed Mr. Sucharitkul's story "The Rainbow King." Generally, fantasy does nothing for me, but Mr. Sucharitkul presented his piece with the proper amount of mystery—an ingredient that is lacking in far too many tales.

And, I had to laugh at the list in "The Slush Pile Strikes!" I think another ending that should be added is: "There were other worlds out there. Other worlds. They could find the way." Perhaps it was with this addition in mind that caused the layout staff to place "The Slush Plush Strikes!" just two short pages after "The Dust of Creeds Outworn," which coincidentally happened to end with "There were other worlds out there. Other worlds. They could find the way."

But I hope you'll excuse me if this letter has turned out a bit more nit-picky and/or critical than I had intended. I wanted to send a letter that ended by saying how much I enjoyed your magazine. So here goes:

Dr. Asimov, although this is the first time I've read your magazine, I have to say that I was thoroughly delighted. And, again, though I've only read one copy, I intend to read *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* regularly from now on. Promise.

Scott Huntwork  
263 McMahon  
Univ. of Washington  
Seattle WA 98195

*I could have told you this at the start. After all, with my name on the magazine could it really be bad?*

—Isaac Asimov

### High Doctor Asimov?

Recently my boss brought a list of magazines in to my office and asked me to purchase a subscription to one of them to help his daughter out. So I wrote a check out and checked off *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. I made him happy and I made his daughter happy. The other day when my first copy of the magazine came in the mail I was happy.

You have a very enjoyable magazine. I realize that Joel and George help out a little and they should be congratulated also. I look forward to the future issues I will receive and I pledge to renew my subscription. (Doesn't that statement just tickle your little heart?)

Now about Issue #36 (February 16, 1981): I liked all the stories but was moved by "Silicon Psalm." It was a wonderful tale, and it

touched me and did something to me; a feeling came over me and stayed with me for the rest of the day. Most stories you read and at the end it's just the end: no big deal, on to the next story. But not "Silicon Psalm." I liked it.

Of course I enjoyed your editorial, and the article on Carl Sagan was interesting and entertaining.

I was a little disappointed you didn't have a contest in this issue. I've been told about your contests, the poems, and such; but I'm never been talented enough to beat out anything worth submitting but I enjoy trying.

Thanks again and write us more often.

Jesse W. Jackson  
2223 ½ 9th Street  
Lake Charles LA 70601

*We'll have another contest when I think of something good. Once we have contests just for the sake of having them, they will inevitably tail off. There's nothing against readers suggesting contests. Many minds make light work.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am writing to tell you how I read your magazine, so that maybe in some way it will help you.

I always flip to the letters section first, since I find them very interesting. Then I read the editorial, which is always outstanding. Next I look through the table of contents, and find the horrible puns and poems. These I read first. Next I look for the stories by my favorite authors or that have interesting names, and read these. Last I read the remaining stories. Usually I end with the novelette, unless it's by Barry B. Longyear. Then I read it first. Rarely do I read the book reviews, since I find them boring, but this is just my own personal taste.

Sincerely,

J Bryan Street  
2235 E. Crescent Dr.  
Seattle WA 98112

*When I was young, I used to start at the first page and work my way through to the end. I was at it for quite a few years before I realized that there was no real rule that said you had to.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac and George,

Just to refute Darrell Schweitzer's rumor about all science fiction fans having some desire to create in the genre . . .

Please don't send me your manuscript requirement information as I will never, ever darken your desks with attempted literary opus (sic). Here is one fan whose flights of fantasy are always on someone else's wings . . . and I am eternally grateful. The relationship suits me fine.

In friendship,

Diana Carson

P.S. This non-author is currently working on a load of laundry, a volunteer organization, getting a son applied to various colleges, nurturing the kids, a husband, 1 dog, 2 cats, mastering oriental cooking . . . etc.

*One empty envelope is en route to you.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers and Company:

First, I am immensely pleased with my subscription to *IA'sfm*; I anxiously await each new issue. I believe that the superior regular features of your magazine separate it from the others in the field. Every month I know, whether or not I particularly like the fiction, that I can look forward to the Doctor's editorial, Mr. Searles on books, and a good selection of letters to the editor. This base of quality will support *IA'sfm* through any short periods of not-so-spectacular fiction.

Speaking of which, I would like to thank Ted Reynolds for saving an otherwise fictionally mediocre March issue. I have been a fan of Mr. Reynolds since "Can These Bones Live?" and "Through All Your Houses Wandering" did not disappoint. I hope you hear often and soon from his typewriter.

Switching from reader to occasional submittor, I have a few suggestions for rejections. A very beginning, unpublished writer, like myself, finds it difficult to gauge his/her relative position in the quest for publication. I would like to see, in addition to the very helpful suggestion sheets you include with returned stories, ratings of the idea and the writing. I recognize that these ratings must be very subjective, but I certainly don't mind subjective from "those who buy ink by the barrel."

I am speaking of a simple form letter with five categories for writing skill ranging from "1—Go back to school" to "5—Excellently written, unpublishable for other reasons," and five categories for idea ranging from "1—Incomprehensible" to "5—Excellent idea, re-write and submit again." It does not seem too time-consuming for the particular editor rejecting the story to check two boxes and include the sheet with the story.

This rating sheet could be optional; some writers may not want to know where they stand. I do, and I intend to request just such a rating every time I submit, just in case the next story to emerge from my typing machine isn't automatically publishable.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,

Douglas H. Sayers  
Titusville FL

*Somehow I think George will turn pale at the thought of quantifying his rejections—but perhaps he will speak for himself on this point.*

—Isaac Asimov

*A one-to-five scale, we think, would appear to be rating the author, rather than the story. But, more importantly, saying, "Re-write and submit again," wouldn't do us or the author any good, since he or she has to know what areas to re-write; we must be specific. Our present system has made note of several common problem areas in concept and writing. Beyond that, an author we're encouraging will most likely receive a personal note from us, explaining in more detail how we feel the work can be improved.*

—George H. Scithers  
and Shawna McCarthy

Dear Sir:

As someone who enjoys poetry that follows the old rules, congratulations on "Improbable Bestiary: The Chinese Dragons". There is never enough science fiction/fantasy poetry around.

Does Miss(?), Mrs.(?) (as an old fashioned male chauvinist pig I despise Ms) MacIntyre have anything more for us in this line? Hopefully yes and very soon.

Sincerely,

Jack Sword  
Garden Grove CA

*Miss/Mrs./Ms MacIntyre was a Mr. the last time I saw him, but if he will insist on the use of an epicene middle name he has only himself to blame.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George,

I was delighted to see Asimov's editorial boosting science fiction poetry. Perhaps some of your readers would like to know about the Science Fiction Poetry Association, our organization for circulating and discussing SF and fantasy verse. SFPA currently boasts (and that is the word—they include some very distinguished writers) about a hundred members. It publishes *Star Line*, which is a quarterly newsletter, and plans to publish a series of chapbooks. Dues are \$6 a year. They should be sent to: SFPA, 1722 N. Mariposa Ave. #1, Los Angeles, CA 90027.

Faithfully,

Gene Wolfe  
President, SFPA

*Okay, you versifiers, put your money where your heart is.*

—Isaac Asimov

## NEXT ISSUE

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The September 28, 1981 issue of *IA'SFM* will once again offer you some of the biggest names in SF. To wit: James Tiptree, Jr., with a haunting tale of the "Quintano Roo." And if you don't know where that is now, you'll never forget after you've read "Lirios." To wit some more: Larry Niven, who takes us on a visit to his popular Draco Tavern; R. A. Lafferty, with a trip to White Cow Rock (or is it White Cow Moon?); Ron Goulart, with a short excursion into typical Goulartian madness; and of course, much more, including our usual collections of columns and articles. On sale September 1st.

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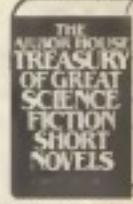
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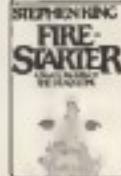
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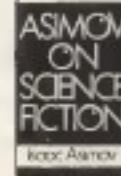
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